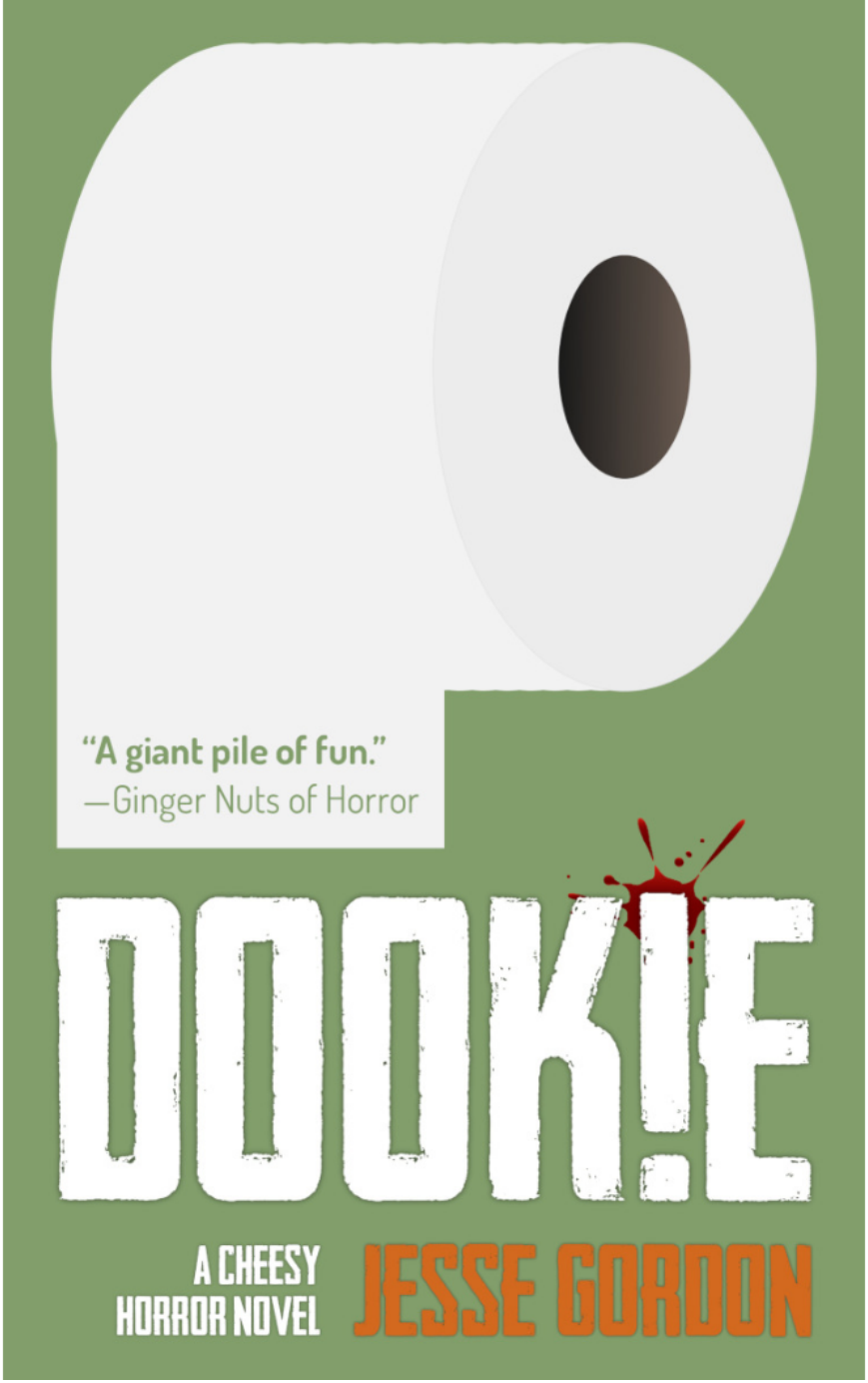
"A giant pile of fun."
—Ginger Nuts of Horror
DOOKIE
A CHEESY HORROR NOVEL
JESSE GORDON

DOOKIE

A CHEESY HORROR NOVEL BY

JESSE GORDON

CREAM-COLORED COFFEE CUP

Dookie

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, locales, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or are used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

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Warning: this novel is garbage.

Seriously.

For Simon & Andy,
fighting the good fight.

Prologue

A lousy Sunday morning.

The Snacks & Such clerk dude is this totally clichéd, totally over-fifty Indian man sporting a totally obvious comb-over. Sitting slouched beside the register, he swipes aimlessly through some random celebrity gossip site on his phone. Off to the side, the coolers hum quietly; near the entrance, an over-zealous air-conditioning vent ruffles the covers of several periodicals stacked on the magazine stand. Business is dead at the moment.

Keeping his eyes glued to his phone, the clerk dude reaches over and grabs a candy bar from the impulse rack, opens the wrapper, takes a bite, his facial expression settling into a natural scowl. He sort of looks like the type who goes fishing for excuses to be a jerk. But looks aren't everything. He may *not* be a jerk. He may just have hate-face. His candy bar may be giving him indigestion. Let's give him the benefit of the doubt, see how he handles that indiscriminate farting noise that's just emanated from the rear of the store. At first he simply looks up and down the empty aisles, at the convex mirror in the corner, the back door leading to the toilet and stockroom. He's pretty sure he didn't see anyone come in. He's also almost as sure the dates on the milk are still good. Passing the fart off as a fluke, he resumes killing time on his phone.

A second fart sounds from the back, this one longer and wetter than the first. Obvious chunkage can be heard splattering against the floor.

The clerk dude looks up again, his scowl intentional this time because it's now become obvious that there's someone loosing a bowel movement in his store *without first having made a purchase*. He sets down his candy bar and leaves the register, heads for the rear. "No good American hoodlums," he mutters to himself. "Think this is bus terminal toilet..." The fluorescents flicker as he steps into the narrow hall spanning the storage and back office areas. He stops outside the restroom, knocking on the door, which is slightly ajar. "What the hell? Use bathroom is privilege, not right! Out of order!"

Another fart, more splatter.

"Hey! Hey, you! Stop messing on my floor! Out of order! This not rest area bathroom! I count three, I come inside and put feet far to behind so use mouth for take next crap! One...two...three!"

The rampant flatulence continues.

The clerk dude looks down at the floor. A miniature ravine of diarrhea has started seeping out into the hallway.

"Motherspanker! What I say?" The clerk dude shoves the restroom door open,

stumbles inside. "You not need restroom! Need free clinic...oh, *father*..." He trails off, stopping dead in his tracks, mouth open, eyes wide as he spots who (or, in this case, *what*) has been befouling his toilet. For a brief, wavering moment he entertains multiple impossibilities regarding the horrific, grotesque, and totally foul-smelling creature—before it grunts brutishly and blurps toward him. Throwing his arms protectively over his face, the clerk dude manages a frightened scream that's muffled abruptly by what sounds like a mouthful of the grossest macaroni and cheese ever conceived.

Appropriately enough, his last thought before he dies is as follows: *Oh, my various gods—I've become the token ethnic death in the prologue of a cheesy horror novel.*

Chapter 1

Kayleb,
The night before

We're standing outside the Lovéren rec area and staring at the lopsided "Salsa Saturday, by Tacos Unlimited" banner slung haphazardly above the clubhouse entrance when it hits me: this is our new home, a second-rate apartment complex that hosts Salsa Saturdays.

"What are you moping about?" Noah asks, fiddling with the conspicuous-looking DSLR camera slung around his neck.

"I'm not moping," I reply, fully aware of the fact that I'm *totally* moping. "I'm just a little tired." Which is true enough, considering we've been loading and unloading boxes and furniture since nine in the morning, when we'd picked up the moving van. Well, Noah had picked up the van, as I don't drive. I was tasked with making sure all the boxes were ready to go. Mine were. I'd made a point of packing a week earlier. Noah, I kid you not, had at the last minute put some clothes into a trash bag, a desk lamp into a box clearly the wrong size for said desk lamp, and had called it a night. Everything else still needed to be packed this morning—his bed, computer, photo equipment, weights, British Library-calibre DVD and Blu-ray collection—the boxes and packing tape sitting untouched behind the couch.

But the real reason I don't want to be at Salsa Saturday is because I don't want to be here, period. One look at Lovéren, and you'll immediately get why it's the cheapest rent in this part of town (and, quite possibly, all of southern California). It lies at the end of Stucco Street, an old, cracked, heavily-tagged lane of small, single-story homes inhabited by Mexican mega-families or white bread relics from yesteryear clinging onto their properties until age or the stock market does them in. It's not the kind of street you want to accidentally turn onto after dark—or before dark, for that matter. Nevertheless, Noah and I are on a budget, and beggars can't be choosers.

"No one's ever too tired for free food," Noah says, and takes the lead, letting us into the rec area with his key and heading purposefully toward the clubhouse. He smoothes his shirt as we go, checks his breath, the battery state of his camera; he smiles and waves at a miscellaneous bikini babe who happens to spot us from where she's texting mindlessly at the edge of the swimming pool (she doesn't wave

back—they never do).

I adjust the shoulder strap of my messenger bag as we reach the clubhouse. Through the window, I can see two-dozen tenants milling about, eating, drinking, dancing, chatting it up. "You know I'm not the party type. We don't even know anybody here."

Noah pops a breath mint into his mouth, offers one to me. "We know Susan and Ty."

"Ty—the next door neighbor guy who helped you move the fridge while I was out getting us lunch?"

"You should've seen him. One of those big guys. Just picked it up with both arms, no dolly or anything. He's either super-fit or fit-fat. I couldn't tell because he was wearing a sweatshirt."

"Yeah, well, give my regards to his muscles—or his fat. I'm going back to the apartment to finish unpacking." I start to turn away, but Noah grabs me around the shoulders, navigates me toward the clubhouse entrance as he opens the door, guides me through the threshold.

"It's Saturday night," he says. "We're young, new, reasonably attractive. That alone should get us at least a whiff of the local talent."

"Really, dude. This is lame—"

"Twenty bucks says by night's end you'll be rocking a beer in one hand, a babe in the other."

"You don't have twenty bucks."

"Shut up."

The interior of the clubhouse sports a bar (currently being manned by the Tacos Unlimited people), a scuffed pool table and gathering of stained card tables near the front, and a threadbare sectional sofa set in front of a big-screen TV. Someone's got a docked smartphone hooked up to the PA system, saturating the air with upbeat pop.

My instinct is to lurk near the entrance, creeper style.

However, the giant, thirty-something African dude working his way through a heaping plate of fajitas over by the pool table has other plans. On spotting me and Noah, he waves us over, bellowing, "Hey, Photoshop! Over here, buddy!"

"Ty?" I murmur to Noah.

He nods, waves back. "See what I mean?"

I gawk as covertly as possible, trying to make out what might lie underneath Ty's sweats and hoodie combo. "Huh. It *is* hard to tell if he's fit or fat."

"Twenty bucks says he's got man-boobs."

I'll bite. "Twenty says he's non-fat."

"You're on."

I follow Noah over to the pool table.

Ty embraces him as he would an old friend. Then, shaking my hand, he says, "Call me Ty. This is my wife, Susan." He nods at the small and curvy blond leaning over the table to line up her shot.

"Aw, don't you two make the perfect couple." Noah holds up his camera,

gestures for Ty to pose for a picture (glancing at the touchscreen, I can totally see Noah zooming in on Susan's butt). He snaps a quick shot, flicks his camera off.

Susan pockets the cue ball with a disappointed frown, then straightens as we take turns shaking hands.

"They're the new next door neighbors," Ty explains. "Noah and Kayleb."

"Oh, that's right," Susan says, and nods at Noah, at me. "The graphic artist and the programmer, right?"

I smile in as interested a manner as possible. "Nice to meet you."

She smiles at me, gives me a quick, appreciative look-over. "I'm impressed. I thought geeks only came with oversized glasses and pocket protectors."

"You're thinking of nerds," Noah says. "Totally different species."

I stifle a disapproving groan.

Ignoring me, he clears his throat. "So, you two love birds, what rocks your world?"

Susan taps Ty on the chest. "My beefy man here thinks he's a *painter* of all things."

"Don't listen to her," Ty says. "She was a cheerleader in high school. Her idea of creativity is an extra hip for every hurray."

Susan smiles, lets him envelope her in his arms a moment for a polite kiss. It's like watching a bear hug a poodle. I sneak glimpses at Ty's abdomen, trying (again) to figure out if he's indeed fit or fat.

"High-fat," Noah mouths to me, and glances around the clubhouse, checks out the trim.

I mouth "low-fat" back.

After a moment, Ty breaks it off with Susan and nods in the direction of the TV area, where several tenants are playing *Mario Kart* on the big-screen. "Babe, come feed me fajitas while I play."

"Yeah, *right*," Susan replies.

"All right, then. To be continued, y'all." Ty pats me on the shoulder and walks away, taking his plate of fajitas with him.

Susan picks up her cue, faces the pool table for her next shot. "So, Kayleb. How did you two meet?"

I blink, caught off guard. I'd been watching Ty go, had been trying to work out the fit or fat thing in my mind. "Sorry?"

She nods at Noah. "You and your boyfriend."

(At the word "boyfriend," Noah's attention suddenly snaps back to the immediate area.)

"Who, Noah?" I ask.

Susan nods again, makes her shot, hangs a corner pocket.

"Oh, we're not—he's only my—" I laugh nervously. "We're brothers."

"And *totally* not the incest kind," Noah adds.

"You mean you two aren't...?" Susan blushes, genuinely embarrassed. "My bad. Duane said—well, never mind what he said. You guys look nothing alike. Plus you've got the whole pretty-boy, watch-what-we-eat, gym membership thing going

on. I just assumed."

Noah touches his hair self-consciously.

I glance down at my designer jeans. "Er, who's Duane?"

"You know, the manager." Susan gestures at the bar, where an early-fifties, goateed, salt-and-pepper incarnation of any Stephen J. Cannell villain you've ever seen is sitting with his arm around a tipsy-looking female tenant. Noah and I had, of course, met him when signing our lease, but he'd insisted on our calling him "Mr. Bourbon" the entire time. Wankish, if you ask me.

Still talking to the young woman, Duane smiles creepily at us, fires off a fake hand gun in our direction, then proceeds to mime oral sex on the barrel.

"He seems like kind of a douche," Noah murmurs, narrowing his eyes.

"Kind of," Susan agrees.

"I'm going to call him Dwade, just to be on the safe side." Noah looks at Susan again. "What's his deal?"

She waves her hand dismissively. "He's just one of those over-the-hill, tragically-creepy types who doesn't have a clue that he's tragically creepy. He thinks his position as property manager makes him irresistible to anything with tits and legs, and that all college girls actually *like* being offered his 'special move-in reward package,' if you know what I mean."

Thank God we're not college girls.

Susan makes another shot. "You want in on the next round?"

Noah doesn't answer at first; his eyes are locked on the big-breasted blond chick sipping Dos Equis all by her lonesome at the opposite end of the bar. Eventually: "No thanks. We were just about to wander over to the bar for a little drinkie-pooh."

I follow him across the clubhouse—one, because he's literally dragging me along by the hand, and two, because as much as I'm *not* a drinker (or interested in the bar scene at all), what happens next is almost certainly worth the trouble: reaching the bar, Noah winks at me, fluffs his shirt collar, and sidles up beside the blond gal.

"Hey there," he coos, and leans casually against the countertop.

The blond looks at him, wordless.

"Do you like to come a lot?"

"Excuse me?"

"*Here*—do you like to come *here* a lot? You know, Salsa Saturday and all."

"Oh. Sure, I guess."

Noah moves closer. "You know, maybe if you're not doing anything next Saturday we could come together."

The blond rolls her eyes. "That's really cute, but I'm already seeing someone." She stands. "And just so you know, turning up your collar like that is totally code for, 'I'm a loser.'" She walks away.

I smile amusedly and step beside Noah, pat him on the shoulder. "Okay, if that routine didn't work for Ned Beatty in *Silver Streak*, why would it work for you?" Shaking my head, I walk away.

Noah calls after me: "Dude, what? Gene Wilder. Richard Pryor. *Great* movie!"

Noah

Whatever, Kay-Kay. Give me my space, because I'm just getting warmed up.

I fluff my collar again (nuts to Blondie's opinion on the matter), look around for another piece of unsuspecting muff as I cue up some montage music in my head.

Let's start with the lovely ladies loitering beside the bookcase. Grabbing a beer, I walk over and introduce myself: "Hello, darlings. I just moved into building C and thought I'd introduce myself. I'm Noah. And you are—?"

"On our way out," replies the more vocal of the two with a rolling of her eyes and a motioning for her friend to follow as she walks away.

Meh. Let them go. There's a pretty little filly standing over by the window. I go to her, lean against the wall, and smile knowingly. "Hi. My friends call me Noah, but you can just call me."

She raises an eyebrow, doesn't look *at* me so much as she looks *through* me. "Why don't you go help your boyfriend before he hurts himself."

Following her gaze, I glance over my shoulder. Across the way, Kay-Kay is standing outcast style between two card tables, and is trying to use one tortilla chip to scoop another out of his salsa bowl.

Just...#brofail.

Moving on to the gorgeous brunette sizing up salad options at the buffet: "So, Moneypenny," I say, doing my best Sean Connery as I insert myself into her tragically underused personal space, "is there something you'd like to get off your chest?" I nod suggestively, but totally as a joke reference to Bond's womanizing ways.

She smiles, reaches into her pocket, pulls out her cell phone.

See? She gets it. "The name's Noah. You can just go ahead and create a new contact called 'studmuffin...'" I trail off, noticing that she's not opening her contacts app, but is, in fact, posting to social media. While I can't read everything she's writing, I *do* spot the words "loser" and "hitting on me."

Lucky Lady Number Six is a quick exchange over by the bathroom entrance:

"Hey, beautiful."

"Did you just move in?" Number Six asks.

"I sure did, sweets."

"*Ugh*. Then I'm moving out."

Number Seven is really just me getting a drink thrown in my face.

Eight: another drink in the face.

Nine: a soft taco in the face.

For God's sake.

I was right, this place is lame. But, then, so are most mixers. Social ignorants like Noah praise the mixer as a means of meeting new people, but that's not how it works. You go with someone you already know, or you meet up with someone you already know, and if you show up alone initially, it's because you're waiting for someone you already know. Losers like me who truly attend all by themselves, we're relegated to wandering aimless while sipping Mountain Dew and pretending to have a good time. The longer we wander, the less anyone wants anything to do with us...and the more Mountain Dew we drink. Like some kind of vicious cycle.

Eventually, I end up over by the TV area, where Ty, still chowing down on fajitas between rounds, is playing *Mario Kart* with a pair of your more outwardly nerdy tenants. Beside him on the sofa, a twenty-something Hispanic dude (I'm going to call him Doug, because he looks like a Doug) is making out with a voluptuous *mulatto* (let's call her Alicia)—coordinating with tonight's theme of smoking hot twenty-somethings as the dominant female variety in attendance. I wonder if Duane rents exclusively to hotties when it comes to women, or if he just hires girls from the local junior college to fill out his parties.

I stand behind the sofa, my attention split between *Mario Kart* and Doug and Alicia's epic snogging.

After a moment, Ty notices my presence and gestures for me to sit. "What's up, Kayleb? Are you going to help me red-shell some mofos?"

Hm. I *am* a *Mario Kart* fan, and, admittedly, part of me is vaguely interested in getting to know my new next door neighbor at least well enough to ensure he'll give me a lift whenever Noah's unavailable. But mostly I want to win the fit-or-fat bet. For that, I'm going to need to do some closer observation. I pay another wary glance at Doug and his supermodel girlfriend—

—and here I am on the sofa, Wiimote in hand, sitting wedged between Ty's bulk and Doug and his girl's writhing bodies (the nerd dudes are wiser, and have long since taken up post on the floor). Every so often a misplaced hand grabs my arm or leg. To say that I'm having difficulty concentrating on the game would be an understatement.

Ty, on the other hand, is in the zone, working his Wiimote like a beast. I don't think he's even aware of the pre-copulatory ceremony taking place a couple of cushions over, or the fact that his stomach seems to be growling insistently despite a constant influx of free fajitas.

"So, uh...*Ty*," I say, paying his gut a quick, concerned glance before locking my eyes with the TV again. "Is that short for something?"

"Tyler," he replies.

"And you're a painter?"

"Off the clock, yeah—blue shell coming for you, first place!"

One of the nerd-boys grunts.

"No offense," I continue, "but you don't exactly look like someone who sits in front of an easel all day."

Ty shrugs. "You don't look like a programmer."

"What's a programmer supposed to look like?"

"Big ol' glasses, neatly-parted hair, pocket protector, slacks pulled up to your titties. What's a painter supposed to look like?"

I think for a moment. "Jewfro, bushy beard, light-blue collared shirt, soft-spoken. Show on PBS."

"Don't you go knocking the dead. Bob Ross was pimp." Ty tilts as he rounds a particularly sharp turn. His stomach growls loudly; he burps.

"So...you're kind of a big guy, huh?"

Ty chuckles, lifts one of his massive arms. "You mean the guns? Asthma as a kid. Cleared up when I started working out. Been lifting since I was fourteen, did a little amateur posing in my twenties."

"Posing? As in bodybuilding?" Suddenly my mood improves.

"Uh-huh."

Heck yeah. You owe me twenty bucks, Noah.

"So, how about you and the bro?" Ty asks. "He tells me this is your first real bachelor pad—bite it, Peach! I don't want your skank-ass cutting me off!"

"Yeah," I reply. "If all goes well. We kind of have this, er, *thing* about moving around a lot."

"Ants in the pants?"

I wiggle my Wiimote, trying to perform a mid-air stunt, but Doug's elbow bumps into me, and I mess up. I glare at the back of his head. "More like bad luck."

Momentarily, Ty rolls into first place and whoops triumphantly, lifting his arms high and doing his impression of Funky Kong's victory dance—with the addition of both his middle fingers extended proudly. "First place, *biatches!*"

The nerd-boys set down their Wiimotes and get to their feet.

Ty continues his shimmy. "That's right. Y'all walk it off, get yourselves centered for round three."

"I don't need this," the first nerd-boy says, shaking his head.

"Yeah," adds the second, flipping Ty the bird. "If I wanted to be pommeled by a giant ape I'd hang around the gorilla cages at the zoo."

They bump fists amicably with Ty before walking away—which is good, because for a second there it looked like some serious racist bunk was about to go down.

Setting his Wiimote on the coffee table, Ty avails himself of the last of the food on his plate as the docked smartphone plays itself out. His stomach continues to growl loudly, grotesquely, even, and ever more obvious now that the music has stopped.

"Is that, er, normal?" I ask.

Ty winks at me. "No worries, bro. That means it's time for a refill." He stands, picking up his plate. "You want me to bring you anything?"

"No thanks. I'm good."

Not-so-distant thunder rumbles in Ty's gut. It's enough to make him wince, and he quickly sets his plate back down, makes a beeline for the bathroom, holding

his stomach as he goes.

Huh. I hope it's just him, and not the food.

Ty

It's bad—real bad. Nuclear explosion bad. The kind of bad where I'm dropping my pants before I can even get the bathroom door all the way closed. The kind of bad where I'm shuffling over to the toilet in an inefficient mad rush as my brain disregards normal procedure in favor of getting my quivering Africanized derriere onto a bowl double-time. I make it with milliseconds to spare, gripping the seat with both hands and delivering the loudest, raunchiest, most massive load in all of human history—

Kayleb

Ty's muffled battle cry permeates a good two-thirds of the clubhouse, causing a few raised eyebrows and turned heads, but no real concern. Either nobody cares, or he does this every day, and they've become desensitized.

Doug comes up for air. With his girlfriend still nibbling on his neck, he brushes back his braided black locks, reaches into his pocket, pulls out his phone. He nudges me. "Hey, Beverly Hills. Be a pal and drop my phone into that dock over there, would you?"

I take the phone hesitantly, holding it between my thumb and index finger.

"I'm Marissa, by the way," greets his girlfriend.

"Kayleb," I return.

"We're your other next door neighbors."

Doug (I'm just going to keep calling him that, since he hasn't bothered to introduce himself) jerks his thumb in the direction of the bar. "Duane mentioned that you and your boyfriend moved in this afternoon."

"Oh. That's...cool." Why does everyone think Noah and I are dating?

I start to explain that I'm not gay, but Marissa's attention has wandered back to Doug, and she starts making out with him again.

And I'm just like, really? These two are so into each other that they can't help having mouth-sex in a clubhouse crammed full of people? *Really?*

Frowning, I hold up Doug's phone.

There's a suspiciously short and curly dark hair plastered to the touchscreen.

Ty

I lean back with a sigh, draping one arm over the toilet and wiping sweat from my

brow with the other. That was *the* most intense loaf I've ever pinched. Freakin' Tacos Unlimited. I don't know why I trust my delicate internals to your grease bombs. Susie's going to give me the biz about it for a week. But *dayum*, those were some good fajitas.

I wipe, pull up my pants, pay an obligatory glance down into the bowl (it never hurts to confirm receipt of delivery), and the sheer volume of waste material I've just evacuated from my bowels is...*dayum*. I have to take out my phone, snap a photo. Several, actually. When I'm sure I've got one at just the right angle, and with just the right lighting, I turn to go. Halfway out of the stall, though, I stop, realizing the toilet hasn't flushed. I wave my hand in front of the motion sensor. Nothing happens. I step all the way out of the stall, then back in. Still nothing.

A fly lands on the toilet seat.

So much for taking a gentlemen's dump.

Kayleb

Having docked Doug's phone (and unknowingly unleashed a rowdy death metal playlist unto the clubhouse), I scope out an empty table and set myself up with my laptop and another Mountain Dew. The company may be meh, the food may be giving Ty the hefties, but at least the Wi-Fi works well enough for fail videos on YouTube.

Momentarily, Noah—shirt wet, beer in hand, soft taco debris on his shoulder—joins me, sitting at the table and immediately scowling at my laptop. "Dude, please tell me you're organizing the phone numbers of all the women you hit on tonight into an Excel spreadsheet."

I quickly close my laptop, clear my throat. "You've got food on your shoulder."

Noah checks himself—

"And everyone here thinks we're a couple. Just so you know."

—removes the offending taco pieces from his shoulder.

"Well, everyone but Donkey Kong."

"Donkey Kong?"

"Ty."

"Dude. Racist."

"What? He was Funky Kong on *Mario Kart*."

Noah frowns, pops the taco pieces into his mouth. "There. Would a gay man eat discarded shoulder-food?"

"Not a successful one."

Noah sips from his beer, gazes forlornly around the clubhouse at the various women he's wooed unsuccessfully (in other words, all of them). "This sucks. I've got nothing against dudes who like snacking on other dudes, but I am *not* leading an unintentional gay pride parade my first weekend in the new pad." He looks thoughtful for a moment. "Although if we *did* play the gay card...I mean, chicks aren't threatened by gay guys, right?"

I shake my head. "Dude, no. Absolutely not—"

"Hear me out."

"Noah—"

"Everyone thinks we're an item, right? Well, let's be an item. No pressure, no pickup lines, just a couple of life partners out to make friends. Perfectly innocent. We get a few drinks into the ladies, take them back to our place, gently ease them into the scenario that neither of us has ever been with a woman before—"

"Okay, fail," I interrupt, and start counting off on my fingers. "A, you've already broadcast your awkward, overtly-offensive heterosexuality to everyone in the clubhouse. B, this is *Salsa Saturday*. These people didn't come here to hook up, they came to stuff their faces with free grub. C, you owe me twenty bucks."

"What for?"

"Our good buddy Ty over there is stacked. He used to be a bodybuilder." I nod in the direction of the bathroom, where Ty has just emerged with quite the sweaty brow and armpit stain combo.

"I call bull," Noah says.

"Go talk to him yourself on the way to the nearest ATM—"

"'Used to be a bodybuilder' doesn't count."

"Only because it's not in your favor. Pay up."

Noah rolls his eyes. "Don't change the subject. You're supposed to be meeting the neighbors, making friends."

"I met Susan. I played video games with Ty. I had secondhand sex with Doug and Marissa."

"Wait, what now?"

I wave my hand at the TV area, where they've spread out, taking over the entire sofa. "The horny couple from next door."

"Secondhand sex isn't a thing, and even if it were, you know what I mean."

"I rarely know what you mean."

"Let me spell it out, then. The whole Bridget affair was a year ago. Temporary college fling who threw your heart out with the trash. You can bet she's moved on. You need to do the same, have a little fun." Noah glances critically at my Mountain Dew. "Badly."

I frown. "What's the point? We're going to be out of here after a month or two anyway. You know we have that...*thing*."

"Shut up about the *thing*."

"I'm just saying—"

"You know how I feel about the *thing*."

I resume counting off on my fingers. "Simultaneous girlfriend exodus. Chronic unemployment for most of the year. The *Altar Boy Confessions* incident. Unintentional indoor barbecue at Mom and Dad's..." I trail off, waiting for confirmation from Noah. Instead, the two of us share an uncomfortable pause. "Look. We're going to have to at least *consider* it at some point."

"We're not going to consider it because there's nothing to consider. It may not be Shangri-la, but this place has a swimming pool, and it's got college babes. And

Salsa Saturdays. These are our new digs. This is where we're putting down our roots. At least until we figure things out—*things*. Plural. Not *the* thing."

"Fine. Whatever." I open my laptop once again—

—Noah slams it shut.

"Hey!"

"This is not an Internet cafe. It's a clubhouse teeming with attractive young women—" Noah gestures at Ty, now back at the pool table with Susan. "—and Donkey Kong. But women, most importantly. Stop geeking it up." With a deft movement, he snaps the battery out of my laptop and pockets it.

"Hey—give that back!"

Noah draws me to my feet. "Na-ah. Not until you've at least *tried* to interact socially with something female." His arm around my shoulders, he rotates me slowly.

I sigh, playing along insofar as the sooner Noah realizes the futility of the situation, the sooner we can bail. I regard the handful of women he'd hit on, Susan, the Tacos Unlimited caterer and her lethargic assistant. It doesn't look promising.

Possible exception: the geek-chic Asian chick with the ponytail and glasses who's just stepped through the clubhouse entrance, and who's now surveying the proceedings with uncertain hesitation. Dressed plainly in yoga shorts, a UCI T-shirt, and flip-flops, she's got a smart-girl-next-door thing going on—and something funny happens: I start gawking. Not intentionally. Like, I want to look away, but can't. And I've forgotten how to breathe properly.

Noah catches my obvious infatuation, grins ear to ear. "I always knew you had a thing for hot Chinese girls on laundry day."

"Just give me my battery back," I murmur, continuing to gawk.

"Not until you throw your mack all over that pretty girl's face and body."

"I'm not going to *throw my mack*—"

"Fine. I'll throw mine. Do you forfeit?"

"I thought you preferred blonds."

"I do. But when the pickings are slim...and comely..."

"You're not even into geek-girls."

"What are you talking about? I *love* geek-girls. They're so..." He tilts his head slightly, appreciating the Asian chick's lower half as she heads for the bar. "... attainable."

I clear my throat. "Fine. I'll talk to her—but only to spare her the trauma of being hit on by you."

Noah grins mischievously and starts forward. "Oh, China Girl *so* needs to be traumatized."

I hold him back, grab his beer, down the whole thing in a single draft.

"Dude, your wheat sensitivity," he warns.

I ignore him, hand the empty beer bottle back, and wipe my mouth. Then I put my laptop into my bag, sling the bag over my shoulder. I check my hair, my breath, pop a mint into my mouth, clear my throat, and generally look like I'm over-thinking the situation. Which I am. "All right. I'm doing this. Any suggestions?"

Noah raises his hand, starts to answer—

"No, wait. Never mind. I actually want to make it past the five-second mark."

"That hurt."

We walk over to the bar.

China Girl smiles politely at us as the bartender hands her a wine cooler.

I smile back, lost for words.

Taking a page from Chevy Chase in the *Spies Like Us* classroom scene, Noah clears his throat in a gratuitously obvious fashion and steps on my foot.

It's not enough to bridge the temporal rift that's opened between my mouth and my brain.

So, Noah takes the initiative: "Hi there. I'm Noah. This is my brother, Kayleb."

"I'm Brie," China Girl replies.

"We're new in town. Could you give us directions to your—"

OhdearGod—I kick Noah in the shin, clear my throat, and force my mouth to form coherent words. "We, uh, just wanted to *not* be those creepy neighbors who never say hi or ask anyone how they're doing."

Brie gives us a dubious look. "How, uh, considerate of you."

"Is this is your first Salsa Saturday?" Noah asks.

"It is, as a matter of fact."

Noah moves a little closer. "How about that? The three of us are Salsa virgins."

At which point Brie looks down, sees my laptop battery bulging in his pocket—and assumes it's some kind of enormous, angular erection extending along his inner thigh. At least, that's what her expression conveys. "Salsa virgins? Meaning...?"

"It means our salsa hymens are still intact—"

I belch loudly, catch myself, cup my hand over my mouth.

Brie blinks at me. "Are you okay?"

On the plus side, her attention has been momentarily drawn away from Noah's battery-erection. Minus, she's now staring right at me as the gluten in Noah's beer prepares to summon in my gut the dark power of a thousand farts. I also look and feel like I'm going to puke, but nevertheless nod reassuringly, burping again, wincing, shaking my head no—and breaking away from the bar.

"Social indigestion," I overhear Noah telling Brie as I head straight for the bathroom. "He's had it ever since he was a kid."

In my mind's eye, I'm shoving people aside left and right, am overturning furniture and ripping doors from their hinges on an epic crusade to make it to the rear of the clubhouse before my insides explode. In reality, I quietly wee-wee walk my way into the bathroom, hurrying over to the toilet, kneeling, lifting the seat cover—and going bug-eyed when I spot the massive dump filling the bowl. Desperately I wave my hand back and forth in front of the motion sensor—without result. There's only one toilet, and no time to get over to the sink. Considering my lack of options, I FTW it and wretch miserably into the bowl while Doug's death metal music blares over the PA, scoring the entire affair. It takes several good heaves to get everything out.

I'll never understand the inner workings of the gluten-intolerant human body. How does a quarter of a bottle of beer translate to half a bowlful of vomit? I grab a wad of toilet paper from the dispenser and stumble shakily to my feet. I lick my lips, wipe my mouth, toss the used wad into the toilet, which is now a complete and total mess. With one final, useless attempt at waking the motion sensor, I go over to the sink, where I wash my hands and rinse my mouth out. I check my face in the mirror.

"Okay," I tell myself. "So you introduced yourself to the cute girl by almost puking on her. No biggie. First impressions are overrated anyway, right?" I burp inadvertently, then straighten and pop another mint into my mouth. Taking a deep breath, I exit the bathroom—

—not noticing that the mixture of vomit and excrement left sitting in the toilet bowl has begun to shift and gurgle conspicuously.

Even if I *had* noticed, I'd probably not give a damn, because on setting foot back in the clubhouse, my gaze immediately darts over to the bar. Noah and Brie appear to be having a successful conversation. She laughs at one of his jokes, even—and right then and there I know it's all over. Noah's beat me to the girl, just like he always does. We may be geeks, but Noah's the pouty, chiseled, supermodel version of geek. Geek-jock. I'm geek-svelte, wiry enough that I'm not outright skinny, but chicks never hit on me because they assume I'm some lucky dude's slender bottom. Even with a total lack of finesse, Noah has an uncanny ability to coast on sheer determination—and right now, right here, he's determined to get into Brie's yoga shorts before the night is over.

I watch them for a moment—Noah and Brie, that is, and not (just) her shorts. I glance at the TV area. Doug and Marissa have vacated the sofa, have been replaced by another random couple sitting curled together and creating their own Mii characters. Even Duane's making his way out the front door with his arm around the blond Dos Equis gal Noah had tried to *Silver Streak* earlier.

Once again, I'm the lurker, a social drifter forever passing through.

Whatever. I didn't come here looking for love. I'm not going to leave lingering on it, either. I let myself out into the pool area and stand motionless, taking in the cool night air.

The sound of a woman's muffled gasp breaks the silence.

Squinting in the semi-darkness, I spot Doug and Marissa. They've dragged a lawn chair into the shadows, and are now in a half-dressed state as they work toward third base...possibly home plate, if they're not caught in time by someone more easily offended than I am. When he sees me staring, Doug continues his smooching, but flicks me off with his free hand.

Embarrassed, I stumble sideways—and into some janitor-looking dude who'd been quietly having a smoke several paces away. Our collision causes a flurry of cigarette ashes to explode across the front of his coveralls. His name tag reads, "Juan."

"Watch where you're going, white boy," he says.

"Sorry." I steady myself.

“You like to watch, huh?”
“What?”
He nods at Doug and Marissa.
I shake my head and move on. “Whatever.”
Juan smiles smugly, takes a drag from his cigarette. “Yeah, he likes to watch.”

Chapter 2

Most people tend to think that Juan Gutierrez is a jerk. He prefers to think of himself as keeping it real. That's why he doesn't do the Salsa Saturday thing. For starters, Tacos Unlimited serves pseudo-Mexican food at best. Mostly, though, he has no interest in what's really just a dog and pony show for Lovéren's white tenants, who don't feel that any amount of rent is justifiable without at least a touch of affluence—even here in the ghetto.

Also, white people tend to be skittish around custodial types.

Perfect example: the pretty-boy nerd shooting him dirty looks as he makes his way out of the rec area. Juan had caught him spying on the horny couple making out over on the other side of the swimming pool. Now he's all butt-hurt over it, is probably off to tell his boyfriend what a jerk Juan is for simply pointing out a basic, universal truth: we all like to watch, and we all get caught. White people just pretend that they don't.

Eventually, the horny couple (having gone about as far as you can go legally while in public) leaves. Juan spreads out on a lounger and watches YouTube videos on his phone until the party winds down—which is at a quarter to midnight, when the last drunken, overfed tenant stumbles out of the clubhouse and in the general direction of their apartment.

At about the same time, the back door of the manager's office opens, and Duane, bathrobed and slippered, exits, ushers out some random *güera* hottie who kisses him goodnight and heads for the parking lot. On seeing Juan, Duane waves and pads over, quietly lights a cigarette, flexes his jaw, takes a long, contemplative drag. Letting it out just as slowly, he murmurs, "I haven't had a cutlet like that in at least a year."

Juan nods.

A moment of silence passes between both men.

When it's obvious Juan isn't going to provide Duane with anything more than a quiet acknowledgment of the aforementioned poontang having been tamed, Duane pats him on the back and says, "Rump for days, *mi compadre*. Rump for days. See you in the morning." He heads back into the office.

Juan doesn't ask, Duane doesn't tell.

Pocketing his phone, Juan makes his way into the clubhouse, walks over to the nearest table, and, hefting an almost entirely uneaten burrito, takes a hearty bite.

Because why the hell not? With his free hand, he starts rearranging chairs, clearing off counter and tabletops. He's in the process of shaking a soda can to see if there's anything left inside worth swigging when he hears the sound of potato salad being mixed with a wooden spoon. It's coming from the bathroom.

Someone's taking a dump.

With the door open.

"The clubhouse is closed!" Juan calls out.

The bowel movement continues to be moved.

Juan frowns and crosses the clubhouse, steps into the bathroom (Jesus, it stinks), expecting to find some wasted individual voiding themselves of too much Tacos Unlimited. No one's around. However, there *is* an enormous load in the toilet, which is dangerously close to overflowing with rich, potent excrement.

"Goddamned Salsa Saturday," Juan mutters to himself, covering his nose with his hand. He walks over to the toilet and tries the motion sensor, but nothing happens.

The toilet bloops again, a trickle of poop-water spilling over the edge of the bowl.

"*Chingados!*" Juan grabs the plunger from under the sink, starts plunging away in grim determination while various thoughts flutter through his head—such as, "My dad was right. I should've stayed the hell in school." As well as, "I could be in my *own* mansion right now plunging my *own* stinking crap." And, "Jesus, I've never seen so much undigested corn in my life."

The toilet continues to burp and bubble, and starts overflowing.

Juan shifts his stance, trying half-successfully not to get poop on his shoes. He waves his hand in front of the useless motion sensor again, starts pounding on it with his fist, at this point mostly out of frustration rather than to entertain any expectation that it might start working—

The toilet belches.

A large projectile dollop hits Juan square in the face. It's mostly the yuck factor, rather than sheer force, that causes him to slip and stumble onto the floor, his arms and legs splashing in a giant puddle of sick. Groaning, he tosses his plunger aside, pulls a handkerchief from his pocket. He dabs at his face, trying to wipe some of the muck from his eyes.

Someone farts loudly.

He pauses, listening. He can clearly hear the sound of breathing nearby. "Who's there?" He looks up. His vision's blurred, but he can make out a figure standing inside the toilet—possibly a child, judging by the small stature.

He resumes dabbing at his eyes. "Are you kidding me? Beat it! Get out of here! The restroom's out of order!"

The figure climbs out of the toilet, starts toward him, slowly, lumbering, its movements the source of the potato salad he'd heard earlier.

"Hey! I said the restroom's out of—"

The figure lashes out suddenly, cutting him off in mid-sentence. He struggles for a moment, trying to shout for help, but he's being force-fed large handfuls of

rank excrement, filling his mouth and nostrils, cutting off his air. His gag reflex kicks in, and he vomits full-mouthed. Now desperate, he grasps his plunger tightly and starts swinging. The figure grabs it, and with superhuman strength wrestles it around in Juan's hands...and starts plunging the bejesus out of his face instead. After a series of painful, violent jabs, Juan loses consciousness, his body going limp, toppling over, the plunger all but embedded in the front of his skull. As such, he doesn't see the blood—his own blood—pooling on the floor, mixing with the dook and vomit; he's not aware of the figure chuckling disdainfully, climbing back into the toilet, receding into the bowl.

Nor the pipes scoring its retreat.

Nor the deafening silence after.

Chapter 3

Kayleb

My phone's ringing.

By the time I wake up enough to answer it, the call's gone to voice mail. Yawning, smacking my lips, dodging the obnoxious shaft of morning sunlight hitting me in the face, I glance at my phone's lock screen. Behind the notification pop-up, a photo of me and my ex-girlfriend, Bridget, fills the background. My gaze lingers a moment on her face before re-focusing on the rest of the bedroom. It's not ideal, but Noah and I are bunking together. Save for a pair of sleeping bags spread out on the floor, all our stuff is still packed away in boxes, office crates, and garbage bags. While a radius of discarded clothes indicates that Noah had stripped down and tucked himself inside his sleeping bag last night, I'm still fully-dressed, my hair tousled, my laptop clutched under one arm. I'm lying sprawled on top of my own bag, as if sleep had been a sudden and unexpected occurrence. Which it was, I guess.

I call my voice mail, press my phone to my ear. Dom's unnecessarily loud voice crackles incoherently on the other end.

Across the way, Noah stretches, yawns, rolls onto his side, facing me. "What's it mean when you have a recurring dream about camping naked in a tent?"

I shrug.

"You look like crap, by the way. Who's that?"

"Dom."

"Oh, Jesus. What does he want?"

"He says this is our wakeup call." I listen some more. "Something about us making sure we get the Web site up and running by Monday morning, eight o'clock sharp, or else the client's going to..." I let the rest of the voice mail play out. "...use us as the bread on a knuckle sandwich."

"Screw him." Noah grabs his underwear, pulls it into his sleeping bag so that he can put it on before unzipping, standing, stretching, and scratching his stomach. "We've got it covered. Graphics are almost done, template's good to go, right? We set up the office, hit Burger King for lunch, and spend the rest of the afternoon dropping in content while we digest and vent toxic gas. You can do all your testing tonight while I break in the new swimming pool. Tomorrow morning it's free Wi-

Fi at Denny's while we upload Dom's precious code over bacon and eggs."

I sit up, take off my shoes. "Your attention to useless detail is staggering."

"And your lack of enthusiasm concerns me."

"Pardon me if I'm not completely overjoyed at the prospect of spending the rest of my weekend doing a Web site for a guy you refer to as Asian Hitler."

"He pays our bills."

"He's also a dick."

"Cheer up, Kay-Kay. We're in a new apartment—our *own* apartment. Our *own* home business. We're going to turn things around. No more flipping burgers for dateless gluttons or printing out flyers for loser garage bands. No more putting up with Mom and Dad being, well, Mom and Dad..." Noah trails off, holding his pants, considering, then tossing them back onto the floor. "No more having to wear pants."

"You're entirely too optimistic for eight in the morning." I get to my feet and exit the bedroom as Noah flexes his legs, does a few squats.

"I'm just jazzed about the no-pants thing!" he calls out.

The living room, much like the bedroom, is maybe ten-percent unpacked, with carpeting that's either intentionally shagedelic, or that hasn't been replaced since the late seventies. Despite the fact that the windows are closed and the wall-unit AC cranked, the air reeks of the neighbors' weed. I step between stacks of precariously-placed boxes and unassembled pieces of furniture on my way into the cramped kitchen. The dishwasher, opposite the refrigerator, barely has enough room to open all the way. That means you can either do the dishes or spelunk for snacks, but not both simultaneously.

Speaking of the fridge, on sticking my head inside, I immediately realize that we need to do some serious grocery shopping. There's basically a six-pack of Mountain Dew, a bag of Oreos, and something moist wrapped in a paper towel. We don't even have the fundamentals, like eggs, butter, bread, or milk. Mom and Dad always took care of all that back at the house.

I close the fridge, rummage instead in one of the boxes on the countertop. The payoff: Doritos and several packets of Emergen-C. It's by no means a decent breakfast, *per se*, but at least it's not as bad as Oreos and soda. Mental note to self: BUY FOOD.

Mixing my vitamin water and opening the bag of chips, I make my way back into the living room, navigating carefully over to the sliding glass door. Through the blinds I can see Ty, out on his patio, doing curls with a pair of enormous dumbbells. He's wearing his usual sweatsuit, but all the bulges I can make out would correlate with muscle rather than fat.

Smiling to myself, I call to Noah: "Go ahead and leave my twenty bucks on the counter!"

"Lick balls!" Noah calls back.

I shift slightly, peering into Doug and Marissa's patio, barren but for a small collection of empty beer bottles, several items of discarded clothing, and an overturned lawn chair. Deductive reasoning would suggest that they'd made out all

the way back from the rec area last night, and are likely still having at it this very moment.

Noah, now thankfully in pants, enters the living room, frowns at the clutter. "Dude. We do *not* have this much stuff."

"It only looks like a lot because it's not put away," I say. "How are we going to do this?"

"Well, we should probably set up the office first. You can do that."

"Why me?"

"Because I'm handling breakfast."

I narrow my eyes suspiciously. It always starts like this, with Noah delegating duties not according to who's best-suited for what, but based solely on what he feels like doing in any given moment. Indeed, when I start to protest, he ignores me, walking into the kitchen. I'd glare at him through the cut-out as a plan B, but there are too many boxes in the way. So, I sigh and resign myself to moving stuff around, unpacking, and assembling the various components of our shared office space. I suppose when you look at the big picture, it's better that I'm the one doing it; Noah's *feng shui* is the pits, and he'd probably bungle the wiring setup anyway. The curse of being a creative type. He's a photographic wiz, a graphic genius—once he's in Photoshop, he can make anything happen. But ask him to pair his phone with his laptop, and he'll stare at you like you just asked him to perform open-heart surgery.

From the sound of things, he's keeping his word. I can hear him poking around in the kitchen, putting something in the microwave, then heading back into the bedroom—or, more accurately, the bathroom, because from where I'm kneeling, I can totally see him not bothering to close the door behind him as he takes a leak. Not that I'm *watching* him. It's more like I'm mesmerized by his complete and total lack of modesty as he manages his junk with one hand, uses his other to open the medicine cabinet.

"Three of the four medicine cabinet shelves are missing," he calls over his shoulder. "And there's no spindle on the toilet paper dispenser!"

"*Dude!*" I call back, intending to scold him about tinkling with the door open. However, at that moment he happens to flush. Normally, I'd be thrilled that he remembered—if only the plumbing hadn't started rattling and groaning like something out of *The Goonies* pipework scene. Worse, the toilet suddenly decides to back up, causing water to spill profusely over the sides of the bowl.

"Oh, geez, oh, *geez!*" Noah yelps, and quickly zips his fly, takes refuge in the bathtub. Luckily, one of us was smart enough to unpack the plunger yesterday. He grabs it from beside the toilet and starts working the bowl. After a handful of mighty thrusts, the water recedes with a raunchy gurgle, and the pipes quiet themselves. Noah drops the plunger, wrings his hands, then carefully leaves the bathtub, splashes his way out of the bathroom and into the bedroom. Reemerging fully dressed, he makes for the front door. "BRB," he says. "I'm going over to the manager's office to file my first formal complaint." He slams the door behind him.

The microwave beeps.

Released from a sort of trance, I give one particular clump of tangled USB cables a half-hearted tug before getting to my feet, carefully extricating myself from the mess, and entering the kitchen. I check the microwave; there's a bag of popcorn inside.

Okay, if this is Noah's idea of breakfast, he totally deserves what just happened to him.

I open the bag, pop a few kernels into my mouth.

The pipes start knobbing again.

At first, I assume it's one of the neighbors flushing, but when the sound doesn't abate, when it starts getting *louder*, I set the popcorn down on the counter and dash into the bathroom. Doing my best to step between the puddles of toilet water Noah so kindly left all over the floor, I go over to the sink and tighten the faucet handles. However, the knobbing continues—and is now accompanied by a hideous gurgling from the toilet. I face the bowl, and I kid you not, all the water inside drains almost instantaneously. Thing is, it's not a proper flush, as the tank doesn't empty in the process, nor does it refill. The water's just...gone.

In a move worthy of Wile E. Coyote himself, I bend over for a closer look—and get a face full of water as the toilet decides to reverse-flush itself somehow, drenching me and at least a third of the bathroom.

Silence again.

I spit water, lick my lips.

This is what affordable rent gets you in southern California.

Chapter 4

Noah

I'm not one of those complacent tenants who argues over every little thing for something to do. I'll unclog a sink drain or fix a light bulb or replace a dirty air conditioner filter and not make a fuss about it. But if I'm paying my landlord to manage a property, he'd better *manage* the property. As in, I'd better have me some water, power, AC, and toilet paper dispenser spindles—because if you're not going to provide me with said amenities, don't charge me for it.

Despite the sign on the door clearly stating that office hours are from eight to five every day, and despite it being noticeably *after* eight, Dwade's office is a ghost town. I press my face against the shuttered window and cup my hands around my eyes in a half-assed attempt to peer inside. I knock. Wait. Check the time on my phone. Knock again. Try to peer inside the office a second and third time. At last there's movement within, and Dwade finally answers. He's wearing a bathrobe and sunglasses, and is holding a mixed drink in one hand. It looks like he's just gotten out of the shower.

"Well, good morning, beautiful," he greets, smiling his sleazy smile as he runs his eyes up and down my torso. "What can I do you for?"

Effing Duane. I'm glad I've decided to call him Dwade—because that's what he is: a caricature of himself. A Dwade. "My toilet just threw up."

"Well, come on in, then, and let's get you all taken care of."

For those of you who haven't had the privilege of visiting Lovéren, Duane Bourbon's office is less office and more seventies disco lounge. Somewhat elongated, it's got two smaller compartments toward the rear: a bathroom, and, behind a veil of beads, a back office. The place is all shag carpeting, plush seating, throw-pillows, rounded ottomans, mid-century modern shelving.

I step inside.

Dwade closes the door, gestures at the sofa set facing his desk. "Please, have a seat, my little early bird."

I sit, spotting a stack of memory cards scattered across Dwade's otherwise retro-looking desktop. I also notice a high-end DSLR camera and a bottle of baby oil.

Dwade opens the blinds, letting in some light, then sits behind the desk. "So, maintenance request, is it?"

"Yeah."

"And what would you like me to...fix?"

Did you hear that little bit of innuendo? It wasn't just me, right? "Well, our toilet needs to be brought up to twenty-first century specs. And if it's not too much trouble, it'd be nice to have a place to hang our TP rolls and store our expired medications."

Dwade puts on a playful pout. "No need for the attitude, son. We're all family here at Lovéren." He pulls a pen and paper from a desk drawer, starts writing. "It's Noah, right?"

"Right."

"Mm-hm. I never forget an ass."

"What?"

"Face." Dwade clears his throat. "I never forget a *face*. Apartment number?"

"C13."

"Waist measurements?"

Okay, to hell with innuendo, that's just—

"I'm playing with you." Dwade chuckles disarmingly.

Noah is unamused.

"Does Juan have permission to enter your unit?"

Now I'm just hearing things. "Uh...sure."

"All right, then." Dwade holds up the maintenance form. "Usually there's a queue of a day or two for non-emergencies, but..." He gives me an appreciative glance. "...you get bonus points for presentation. I'll make sure Juan gets you squared away nice and good by five-o tonight."

"That would be...great." I get to my feet, pay the bottle of baby oil another glance, head for the door.

As I go, I swear to God I feel Dwade undressing me with his eyes as he mutters, "That's some solid, all-American craftsmanship right there." Followed by a hummed rendition of, "Like a Rock."

Chapter 5

Kayleb

Being doused with toilet water is as good an excuse as any to try out the laundry room, so I throw together a load and haul it over. To my awkward surprise, Brie, glasses-free this morning, is sitting on one of the washing machines with her laptop while she waits for her clothes to dry. I'd kind of figured I'd be better off never running into her again after last night's failed first impression, but chance is an ironic vixen, it seems.

I try to play it cool, resisting the urge to say hello, hoping, really, that she fails to notice me at all. The reality: two steps into the laundry room I trip over my own feet and slam loudly into the nearest washer.

On hearing my clamorous entrance, Brie looks up.

"Hey," I say, righting my basket.

"You're up early," Brie replies.

"So are you."

"Natural-born early bird. What's your excuse?"

I smile sheepishly as I feel around in my pockets for my laundry card. "No clean underwear."

Brie grins amusedly, returns her attention to her laptop.

I get the washer going, then stand with my arms folded and try my best not to look like I'm checking Brie out. Which I totally am. Once again, she's dressed weekend-casual, and I'm as appreciative of the almost-no-inseam technology of her Under Armours now as I was last night. If only I could find words, something with which to start a conversation so that I'll have a valid excuse for looking directly at her. But every in seems cliché, based on my having observed her from afar: "I noticed you own a laptop. Are you into computers?" Or, "I saw your UCI shirt last night. You go to school?" Or, God help me, "Your legs are rocking the known world right now. Where do you work out?"

Brie looks up again. "What?"

Wait—I didn't say anything out loud, did I? "Uh, sorry. I was just...you look different without your glasses."

Brie shrugs. "Most people do."

"I'm Kayleb, by the way. The guy who almost puked on you last night."

"Yeah, I remember. Why are you wet?"

"Oh. Our toilet kind of, er, exploded."

"Yuck. I'm not surprised. C13. You guys got the unlucky apartment. I'm across the hall from you. I've had two sets of neighbors in the last six months. You're the third. Not to jinx you or anything." Brie looks down at her laptop again, starts hitting keys with increasing frustration. After a moment it becomes obvious she's having computer trouble.

"What's the matter?" I ask.

"Stupid thing's been freezing randomly ever since it decided to update itself."

"Which version of Windows are you using?"

"Um, the one that came with the laptop?"

I walk over to where she's sitting. "Here, let me take a look."

"Says the random drunk who almost puked all over me at the bar last night." She cradles her laptop protectively.

"No, really," I insist, blushing. "I'm good with computers. I used to work at a PC repair shop."

"Yeah, I know. You're some kind of super-smart computer wiz. Noah told me."

"He did?" Huh.

"Yep. Right before he mentioned that he'd lost his phone number, could he have mine?"

"That's one of his favorites."

"Does he realize how desperately cheesy his pickup lines are?"

"He tends to look up all his flirting material on Google."

Brie makes another attempt to coax her laptop into cooperating. Finally, she sighs and hands it to me. "All right, geek boy. Show me your superpowers—but no poking through my photos or browser history."

"Yes, ma'am."

She scoots beside me so that she can watch over my shoulder. Out of the corner of my eye, I can tell she's studying me as much as what I'm doing on her laptop—or maybe I'm imagining it. It's kind of hard to concentrate right now for reasons involving her proximity and choice of body spray.

"So, how come you left the clubhouse so early last night?" she asks after a while.

I go with the first lame excuse that pops into my head: "I wasn't feeling well."

"Well, thanks for leaving me to fend for myself against Noah. No offense, but he's like the human equivalent of a bottle of spilled cologne."

"He's got sort of a developmental quirk-slash-defense mechanism," I explain, "when it comes to women in social settings. Gross overconfidence is the usual byproduct."

"And let me guess—you're the shy, polite one who fixes the girl's computer in the hopes she'll forgive you for totally bungling his first impression the night before."

A cautious smile sneaks onto my face. "Is it working?"

"I'm not sure. I'll let you know after you've fixed my computer."

I continue troubleshooting in earnest.

"What brings you to Lovéren, anyway?"

"Oh, you know. Just...looking for a change of scenery."

Brie laughs. "Right. That's why you moved to the ghetto. Scenery."

"This is hardly the ghetto."

"You *do* know there's a liquor store on the same block as this apartment complex."

"All right. Ghetto Junior. I'll give you that. Why did *you* move here?"

"I asked you first."

I sigh. "Well, to be honest, my brother and I kind of got kicked out of our parents' house."

"How come?"

"It's a long story."

"I've still got..." Brie trails off, checking her dryer's status. "...half an hour until my things are done. That's more than enough time for the prologue."

I sigh again. "A year ago I broke up with my girlfriend. Or, I should say, *she* broke up with me. A week later I lost my job at the computer shop. My roommates told me not to worry, that they'd pick up the slack until I found something else. A month into the job search and one of them decided to get several thousand dollars' worth of dental work done. This was around the time our manager left a note on our door informing us that rent was going through the roof. So, I moved back in with my parents and kept myself afloat doing Web design. Noah ran a photography studio out of the basement. He was actually doing pretty well until the *Altar Boy Confessions* incident."

"*Altar Boy Confessions?*"

"Somebody hacked our parents' Internet connection and was using it to download hardcore porn. Like, the hardest-core there is. As in, the altar boys were not of consenting age."

Brie grimaces. "*Ew*..."

"Yeah. The police broke down our door on the same day Noah was working on a nude spread with some gal. Later, after they'd ransacked our rooms, scoured our computers, and interrogated our parents, they realized it was actually our next door neighbor they were looking for."

"That's...wow. I've never met anyone who's actually been screwed over by the Internet. Besides leaked selfies or bad recipes."

I shrug. "The cops let us go. We even got a letter of apology from the city. Of course, it burned up in the fire."

"*Fire?*"

"Our parents' house burned to the ground a few weeks ago. Freak accident. Nobody's coming out and saying it directly, but they totally blame me and Noah. So, here we are. Lovéren is supposed to be us striking out on our own. Well, together on our own, since neither of us can afford to rent without a roommate. Noah's not my first choice, or my second or third, but we're doing our best with what we've got." I hand Brie her laptop. "Okay, here's the deal. Your Windows installation hasn't been cleaned out in, like, years. I could spend all night removing

junk programs and poking around the registry to remove stale keys, but it'd be quicker to do a re-install."

"So...can you fix it?"

"Sure, but you should backup your files first. Do you have an external hard drive handy?"

"I have an eight-gig thumb drive."

Wow. They still make eight-gigabyte thumb drives? "No worries, I've got one we can use. I can take your laptop back to my place for a few hours—if you're cool with that?"

"And I should offer you my undying trust because...?"

I hold up my hands innocently. "You know my name, you know where I live. I don't even need your admin password."

Brie considers for a moment, paying me a shrewd glance. "How about this. I've got some stuff to do today, but I can bring my laptop over this evening. You can fix it while I watch you like a hawk."

A spark ignites inside my head. I'd been hoping for just a few additional minutes of Brie's time tonight, handing over her laptop and making desperate small talk until she at last made an awkward retreat. Instead, I've kind of sort of in a distant, abstract way set up a theoretically-possible meet-up at my place. "Deal. What's a good time—?"

A woman's scream pierces the air.

Brie hops off the washer, and the two of us dart over to the window. On the other side of the rec area, a middle-aged woman has stumbled out of the clubhouse, and is babbling hysterically at a bewildered-looking groundskeeper. The woman's got what looks like mud smeared on her hands, her legs; there's a trail of it leading back inside.

"It's finally happened," I say, unsure whether I should be grossed out or amused.

"What?" asks Brie.

"One of Noah's cheesy pickup lines has taken on human form and attacked a neighbor."

Chapter 6

Kayleb

It turns out the muddy woman was in fact a *scuzzy* woman—as in she'd been covered in feces when she'd come running out of the clubhouse. The reason she'd been screaming bloody murder? Having gone inside to reclaim her cell phone, which she'd left behind during last night's festivities, she'd instead found Juan, dead as a doornail, lying splat in the middle of some kind of horrific plumbing disaster in the bathroom.

An hour later, the police have arrived, and have roped off the area. Two officers are in the process of interviewing Duane, the scuzzy woman, and the groundskeeper. Bits of foul-smelling feces trail from the open clubhouse door. A handful of residents gawk from the rec area's periphery. Brie and myself, toting our clean laundry, are among them, and are watching the proceedings with distant concern when Noah approaches. He's got a cinnamon roll in hand.

Looking pleased, he says, "That the vending machine here has cinnamon rolls almost makes up for everything else about this apartment complex slurping wiener..." He pauses, taking in the mayhem. "What the hell happened here?"

"The maintenance guy's dead," I reply. "He had some kind of accident in the men's room or something."

"Or *something*," Brie says.

I nod at Noah. "Where have you been?"

He holds up his cinnamon roll. "Vending machine."

"All this time?"

"Well, I had to go on a little field trip to unpack my change jar. Why is it that the things you need most in life are always packed at the very bottom of a box that's at the very bottom of a stack of other boxes?" He takes a bite of his roll, studies the skid marks in the rec area. "It smells like...is that...?"

"Yep."

Noah momentarily stops chewing as it dawns on him that he's looking at and smelling human feces. "Ugh. Dude. That is without a doubt the *worst* way to die."

"Well, the filthiest way to die, maybe," I say, "but not the worst."

"What could be worse than death by poop?"

"What about castration?"

"Hm. Good point. How do you feel about fatal yeast infections?"

"Not as bad as gigantism of the eardrums."

"Totally."

Brie shakes her head. "You guys are *terrible*." She starts walking back to her apartment.

Noah follows her for a few steps, spreading his arms. "What, too soon?"

My phone rings. On answering it, Dom's frenetic ranting and raving comes crackling through the earpiece. Something about being on time, optimizing time, making time my bitch, and so forth. I hold the phone slightly away from my head and look over to where Duane and the police are conversing. He catches my stare, blows me a kiss.

Really, now. What the hell is his deal?

"Yeah, I got your voice mail," I tell Dom. "No, no. No snags. Settled in last night, working on the site today, no problem. Just smoothing out the rough edges. Yep. Monday morning. Gotcha. No worries. Mm-hm. Okay. Bye." I end the call and stuff my phone back into my pocket.

"Was that Dom?" Noah asks.

"Yeah."

"Geez. The guy's always on. He's like a talking pull-cord doll that's learned to pull its own cord."

Ty, car keys in hand, happens to arrive right as a pair of paramedics are hauling Juan's body out of the clubhouse and off the property. "What the hell's happening out here?" he asks, dumbfounded.

"Clubhouse toilet exploded," Noah says. "Janitor killed. Death by poop."

Ty's expression turns distant. (Currently, neither Noah nor myself is remotely aware of why this is. However, by the same time tomorrow, we'll realize that, due to certain impending events, it's because he's at this very moment experiencing a vivid flashback of last night's epic bowel movement while simultaneously considering the very real possibility that his abundant fecal matter has indirectly killed a man.)

"The toilet didn't *explode*," I say, glaring at Noah.

"Toilets explode in these parts. That's what they do. Or weren't you paying attention this morning?"

"For all we know, Juan simply slipped and fell while he was cleaning."

"Yeah—because the toilet friggin' *exploded* in his face."

"You don't know that."

"And you don't, er, *not* know that." Noah finishes his cinnamon roll, glances at Ty's car keys as he tosses the wrapper into a nearby trashcan. "Are you heading out by any chance, big guy?"

Ty blinks, shakes himself out of his reverie. "Yeah, as a matter of fact. I'm going to do some grocery shopping. Y'all want to come with?"

Noah nods, rubs his stomach. "Perfect timing. I was just about to ask where a man can get his Corn Pops and toilet paper in this neck of the woods."

"We should finish setting up our office," I say, knowing that we *do* need to go

shopping. But I also know Noah well enough that a good part of his desire for toilet paper and Corn Puffs is motivated by procrastination. And we really need to stop procrastinating if we want to make Dom's deadline.

"Don't you worry your pretty little head," Noah says. "There'll be plenty of time for that after a hearty breakfast." He pats Ty on the shoulder. "Come on, boss."

The two of them start toward the parking lot.

Hefting my laundry, I follow after. "Dude, the entire rec area literally smells like crap. How can you be thinking about food?"

"Millions of years of evolution, Kay-Kay."

Chapter 7

Noah

Let me take a moment to tell you about the little bro. He's a worrywart. He worries too much about everything. He even worries about worrying. We've got the rest of the day to finish Dom's site, which is already pretty much done. Our apartment will get unpacked, if not today, then tomorrow. Or Tuesday. Or next week. Normal people take their time with their moving arrangements. We don't need to be perfect little humans, all settled in and organized our first weekend in the new pad. But Kay-Kay has this thing about *beating* deadlines, not just meeting them. If something's due on Friday, he has to have it done by Thursday. I get it. He really wants our home office to work. There are going to be rules and schedules and all that. We're going to need to prove ourselves. I just don't subscribe to the notion that work has to be, well, *work*. I mean, part of the allure of starting a home business in the first place is setting your own hours, making your own rules—living *your* dream instead of some corporate slave master's. The way Kay-Kay's acting, he might as well go back to working in a cubicle.

Plus the superstition thing. As in, he thinks all the messed up crap that's happened to us lately is due to the universe or fate or whatever. But I won't dignify the rest of that with an explanation. Sometimes bad things happen to good people...or to average, dime-a-dozen bottom-feeders like us. Worrying about it does nothing for nobody.

"We're going to buy our groceries from the liquor store?" Kay-Kay asks as we pull into the Snacks & Such parking lot.

"Sure," I reply, unbuckling my seatbelt. "Why not?"

"I thought we were doing a Ralph's run, or Trader Joe's or something."

"Don't let the name throw you," Ty says assuringly. "This place is more than just snacks. They've got milk and bananas."

"See?" I smile. "Milk and bananas."

Kay-Kay still doesn't look sold, but he follows me and Ty inside regardless, breaking away immediately to give the place a thorough point inspection, no doubt.

Over at the register, the Indian clerk dude gives us a quick disapproving frown before going back to doing whatever it is he's doing on his phone.

Ty and I grab ourselves a pair of hand baskets and stroll down the food aisle.

"So," I say, "the little lady's cool with your being a stay-at-home hubster?"

"We've got ourselves sorted out," Ty replies.

"Which is why Susie—what's her bread and butter?"

"Law office jockette."

"Which is why she's doing the business casual thing at the office while you stay home mixing paints and blasting those glistening, heaving pecs of yours?"

Ty shakes his head. "It's not like that. She does the nine-to-five, sure, but I do all the cooking, cleaning, and shopping."

"You're a manhousewife."

"*I'm a stay-at-home husband.*"

"And Susie's cool with that? I mean, *really* cool with it? As in, she's never come home from a long day at the office, thrown down her briefcase, and said, 'To hell with this. *You* go out and run the rat race. *I'll* stay here and fold the laundry, dust the countertops?'"

"Honestly, my woman believes in me. She's the most supportive person in the world. Also, she hates cleaning and can't cook."

I smirk playfully. "Manhousewife."

"Brave new world, baby. The Al Bundy model went out with land lines and Blockbuster Video." Ty stops, grabs a canister of Comet and a pair of cleaning gloves, puts them into his basket. "How about you? Girlfriend? Wife? Ex?"

Clearing my throat uncomfortably, I say, "Ex. It...didn't work out." Cut to the following slow-motion flashback memory accompanied by a melancholy operatic music track: me, naked and holding a throw-pillow over my crotch while bracing against a barrage of verbal and physical abuse from my then-girlfriend, who'd just walked in on me sleeping with my then-*other*-girlfriend, who's just as naked as I am, and who's frantically picking her clothes up off the floor, stumbling into the bathroom, and...yeah. That's how that went.

Kayleb

I hobble up to the cash register. "Excuse me, sir?"

The clerk dude looks up from his phone.

"Hi. Can I use your restroom?"

The clerk dude nods, gestures at the door toward the rear of the store, and in the thickest Indian accent you ever heard says, "Through back door, then left."

"Thanks." I start away—

"Door is locked."

—and stop, facing the register again. "Oh." I wait expectantly. "Is there, uh, a key or...?"

"Door take token only."

I narrow my eyes. "How much for a token?"

"Token free."

"Oh. Okay, then. May I have a token?"

"Token inside register."

I frown at the clerk dude.

He frowns back. "Cannot open register without purchase."

Normally, this is where I'd walk right out of the store, but I really have to whiz. So, I pick a pack of chewing gum from the impulse rack, slide it across the counter.

The clerk dude holds up his hands. "Sorry, sir. Cannot open register for less than one dollar."

Beginning to seethe, I stare the clerk dude down as I remove another pack of gum from the rack and place it on the counter.

"Thank you, sir," he says, and rings up the gum. He hands me a token along with my change.

I pay him one more dirty look before leaving the register with my "purchase." I mean, come on. He knows I have to take a leak, and he's using it against me for his own capitalistic gain? What a total shaft.

Noah's flagging me down, something about which Ramen flavor goes best with which lunch meat, but I ignore him completely as I rush to the back of the store, down a cramped hallway, and, appeasing the lock with my hard-won token, into the bathroom. I flick on the light, fumble with my belt, my zipper—and stop short when I spot the toilet. With its lid duct-taped shut. With a sloppily-written "out of order" sign fastened to the tank.

Noah

Kay-Kay catches up with us in the parking lot. He's looking mighty irked.

"What's with you?" I ask him.

"My bladder is about to explode," he replies.

Ty jerks his thumb over his shoulder. "Why didn't you use the toilet in the store?"

"Because it's out of order, and because the clerk is a *turd*." Kay-Kay steps ahead of us, fidgeting impatiently.

"Cranky bladder," I explain to Ty. "He'll cheer up once he's had his brunch."

Ty nods knowingly and unlocks his truck. We pile in and head for home—

—completely unaware that at this very moment, the Snacks & Such clerk dude is about to investigate an indiscriminate farting noise that's just emanated from the rear of the store...

Chapter 8

Kayleb

With the clubhouse roped off and our plumbing still on the fritz, there's now something of a toilet shortage going on at Lovéren. On returning from the Snacks & Such, Ty does the neighborly thing and lets me use his—which turns out to be both a blessing and a curse. Blessing: I'm finally able to void my bladder of the gallon of excess fluid I've been carrying around all morning. Curse: the minute or two I'm in Ty's bathroom is enough time for Noah to pop open a beer and sprawl on the couch as audience for a spontaneous art exhibition.

"Come look at these, Kay-Kay," he says as Ty arranges a selection of small canvases on the coffee table.

I sigh inwardly. It's not that I'm unappreciative of Ty's talent; I just know that if I don't keep things moving, we'll end up hanging around here until dinner, and none of our apartment will get unpacked.

Fighting the urge to politely excuse myself, I walk over to the couch, glance at Ty's paintings. It's all scantily-clad bodybuilders, male and female, in various states of flexion, and set against various psychedelic backgrounds. One shows this dude holding his gal above his head as a lightning bolt pierces her chest. Whatever that means.

"Kind of a Boris Vallejo thing going on, huh?" I say in lieu of my brain's initial comment: "Gee, you sure like muscle models."

"I *love* Boris Vallejo," Ty says. "Julie Bell, Frazetta, *Heavy Metal*—all that stuff gets me off."

I nod agreeably, though really I only know who Boris Vallejo is because of his iconic *National Lampoon's Vacation* movie poster. He's good, don't get me wrong. But once you've seen one Boris Vallejo painting, you've pretty much seen them all. Likewise, with Ty's work, you can only pose someone so many ways before the wow factor wears off and you start nitpicking over things like why the hell bodybuilders are floating in alternate dimensions and outer space to begin with.

Fortunately, Ty gets called away to run some errands after a mere twenty minutes or so. Noah and I bump fists with him, and head back to our place, (at last!) spending the rest of the afternoon unpacking and assembling our home office. After trying several different configurations, we settle on a layout with our

respective work areas forming an L against the rear and west walls of the living room. In case you can't tell just by looking, Noah's desk is the one sporting the overpriced Dell XPS laptop, art supplies, camera accessories, comic books, and Kenny Powers bobblehead doll. Mine is one-hundred-percent coder: custom-built PC with a PHP cheat sheet taped to the side of the tower, programming manuals, stacked external hard drives, several test tablets and spare smartphones—all neatly dusted and organized. (Noah makes fun of me for my obsessive cleanliness, but it's worth every penny I've ever blown on microfiber cloths, compressed air, and ninety-nine-percent isopropyl alcohol to *not* be the brother whose data takes a dump annually due to grotesquely unsanitary computing habits.)

At dinner time, the two of us stand side by side and chopstick Chinese takeout into our mouths while we assess our progress.

"Wha-thoo-ooh-think?" Noah asks with his mouth full.

Dead maintenance guy and spurting toilets aside, I'm cautiously optimistic.

This could work.

* * *

Let's say you don't know any better. Let's say you're a superfan of curvaceous cam model brunettes, and you happen to notice the likeness to one of your favorites in the after-hours light as she and her boyfriend let themselves into their apartment. You're probably thinking, "Huh. I didn't know @BootyCutie812 rents here at Lovéren and is dating the luckiest guy alive." You probably want to ask Doug, "Is there any truth to the urban legend that the talented Miss Booty once solved a Rubik's Cube with her hoo-ha?" Then you hear them call each other names like "Alex" instead of "Doug" and "Marissa" instead of "@BootyCutie812," and you turn away, any hope for a celebrity selfie rendezvous now replaced with disdain for the fact that your neighbors, comely as they may be, are otherwise completely uninteresting.

This is what you miss: Marissa flicking Alex off as she turns on the living room light, dumps her handbag onto the sofa. "You're a sexist idiot."

Alex heads into the kitchen to put Italian leftovers into the fridge. "What? I'm just saying that it's a double standard how pop culture likes to peg men as feminism's worst enemy. But really it's women. Men only *think* they have all the power. Women *know* they have the power. Your worst enemy isn't us, it's other women. Women are always grooming each other, telling each other what to do, what not to do, how to dress, how not to dress in the ultimate competition for social dominance. They play it off as catering to the expectations of men in power so they don't have to fess up to being a bunch of psycho-narcissists out to destroy each other."

"See, this is why I don't like you watching YouTube." Marissa removes her shoes, pads across the living room, picking up some random pieces of Alex's clothing on her way to the patio door. She peeks out at the rec area, spots the police tape. "Wow. It's dead out there tonight."

Alex takes off his shirt, dropping it onto the floor and walking over to Marissa. He cradles her in his arms. "I need a shower." He kisses her. "Want to do my front?"

"Promise not to watch anymore progressive YouTube?"

"Not for...a week, at least."

"Two weeks."

"A week and a half."

"Funny." Marissa kisses him back, then gazes through the window once again. She smiles mischievously. "Three weeks, and I'll make it worth your while."

* * *

Five minutes later, the two of them robed and standing poolside, Marissa asks, "What do you suppose the police tape is for?"

"The water's fine," Alex says, dipping his hands into the pool. "Knowing Duane, it's probably some kind of sneaky scheme to cut maintenance costs. We can't go swimming, but we still have to pay rent for an apartment with a pool." He walks over to the jacuzzi controls, turns on the jets. Then, quickly looking around to make sure no one's watching, he sheds his robe. Marissa does the same. The two of them slip naked into the water and start making out. It's not that they're exhibitionists, necessarily; they don't have any specific interest in being seen. The possibility of getting caught is merely an added bonus.

One of the skimmers at the far end of the pool starts gurgling suspiciously.

Heedless, Marissa works at Alex with such enthusiasm that he honestly wouldn't give a damn if the ghost of Jacques Cousteau himself had decided to snorkel beside them. For a moment it looks like they're going to go all the way right here and now, but Marissa disengages, climbs out of the jacuzzi, runs over to the pool. Beckoning to Alex, she dives in.

"Freakin' tease," he whispers, and transitions quickly from jacuzzi to swimming pool. He dips himself briefly in the shallow section before sitting on the steps and waiting coolly for Marissa to make her way back to him. When she does, she wordlessly enters his embrace, resumes making out with him.

By this time, the skimmer has started to spurt and sputter chunky sludge water. Worse, a large turd suddenly buoys to the surface, is carried *Caddyshack* style across the water and toward Alex and Marissa.

Who continue to make out.

As the turd hones in.

Alex shuts his eyes and holds Marissa close as she repositions for third base—

—something warm and mushy slips between his hand and the small of her back. It doesn't register what he's just smeared against her skin until the pungent odor hits him.

It smells like poo.

Marissa slows her pace, whispers, "Yuck. Did you just—"

"Wasn't one of mine," Alex whispers back, reaching up to caress her hair, her

cheek—and that's when he notices he's got crap smeared all over his hand.

"*Eww!*" Marissa wrinkles her nose, immediately lets him go, hauls herself out of the swimming pool. She twists around, dabbing at her backside with a towel. "Is it still on me? Did I get it all?"

Alex wilts, sighing.

There's nothing like a little poop-butt to kill the mood.

He climbs out of the pool and tries to help Marissa towel off, though really he's making things worse. The more he dabs at her various parts, the more poo there seems to be. It's literally *everywhere*. "Duane, I swear. There's human waste floating around the swimming pool, and instead of cleaning it up, his solution is to simply police-tape the area."

"*Ugh*—this isn't working." Marissa shoos him away, dons her robe, and makes a beeline for home.

Disgruntled, Alex does the same.

At the far end of the pool, the skimmer gurgles loudly once more before going quiet.

* * *

Marissa is already in the shower by the time Alex gets back to the apartment. Setting down his towel and robe, he starts to get in with her. "Want me to soap you up using nothing but my—"

"Not now, babe," Marissa replies, and whacks him with her sponge.

"Are you sure? I've got ten different speeds."

"Um, hello? Gross disgusting turd, swimming pool full of cooties—*not* a turn-on."

Alex steps back as Marissa yanks the shower curtain closed. He stands, pouting, shoulders slouched. He can't sit anywhere without leaving dirty prints, so he takes his towel, still relatively clean, and spreads it out on the floor. Then, fishing a joint from the pocket of his work pants, he grabs his lighter from the bedside table, sprawls himself on the towel, and lights up, waits his turn for the shower—because if you're not going to get any nookie, you may as well get high.

Several tokes later, Marissa steps into the bedroom, her hair wet, an annoyed look on her face. "Okay, now you're just screwing with me," she says.

Alex looks at her. "Huh?"

She jabs her finger in the direction of the bathroom. "There's, like, the most *gigantic* turd floating around in the toilet bowl!"

"Wasn't me. I was banned, remember?"

"It was *totally* you. You're always taking dumps while I'm in the shower and then forgetting to flush after."

"Well, yeah, that's usually true—but I swear it wasn't me this time."

"Just take care of it."

"Why me?"

Marissa squats beside him, steals his joint. "Because if you don't do it for me, I

won't do it for you." He reaches for her, but she stands again, kicks his hands away, and starts out of the room. "Literally—clean up your act."

"Don't be such a woman!" Alex calls after her, and gets to his feet. He walks into the bathroom and, standing over the toilet, peers inside. Indeed, there's a humongous turd laying submerged in the water, coiled, serpent-like.

It would appear that Lovéren has the runs.

"Babe, this *totally* isn't one of mine! You know I don't eat this much corn..." He spots a cluster of undigested candy shells. "...or M&Ms!" He flushes the toilet; it immediately begins to overflow. Brown water splashes all over the floor, bubbles up between his toes. The pipes knock and knob. Alex yelps and starts jiggling the handle as he crouches beside the toilet to grab the plunger. That's the plan, anyway. As he's leaning over, he slips, falls, and bangs his chin on the seat. Gobs of butt mud splatter against his face and hair.

"Babe!" Marissa calls out from the kitchen. "Stop with the melodrama! It's just a little poop!"

Alex spits dung water. Gripping the rim of the bowl, he lifts himself up and grasps the plunger, manages a few good thrusts before something beneath the waterline grabs the handle and starts pulling it further into the muck. Alex tightens his grasp, yanks backward—and ends up breaking the handle off. He falls against the wall as, before his very eyes (which are, admittedly, under the influence), the bottom half of the plunger is devoured by the toilet bowl.

The pipes continue to knob; the toilet starts trembling as an eruption of poop water congeals into a small humanoid form.

Alex blinks, bewildered.

The little poop man lets loose a tentative fart, extends a goopy arm, pointing at Alex. "Hey."

"Wow, that was some good weed..."

"Pull my finger."

Alex laughs and runs his hands through his hair. "This is...I'm tripping, right?"

"*Pull my finger.*"

Alex laughs again, scooting forward until he's kneeling in front of the toilet bowl. He reaches out, takes hold of the little man's stubby finger. "Aw, that's *so* nasty—"

Suddenly and without warning, the little poop man lashes out, grabbing both of Alex's arms and pulling him head-first into the toilet—

Marissa isn't too surprised when she hears the muffled scream. A chronic exaggerator, Alex has pulled this kind of stunt before, making a spectacle of something otherwise ordinary—his way of telling Marissa she should've just flushed the toilet and been done with it.

"Alex, seriously!" she calls out, finishing off his joint and popping a strawberry into her mouth. "Quit messing around! You're going to jack up the pipes!"

Alex screams again, but his voice is cut off abruptly.

The walls start to rumble.

The pipes knob.

The windows rattle.

Still only half-convinced there's anything truly dangerous going on, Marissa leaves the kitchen, goes back into the bedroom. She stops in her tracks halfway in, spotting Alex through the open bathroom door. He's still naked and doing what looks like a lopsided handstand over the toilet. Upon closer inspection, however, it's apparent that his head and shoulders have somehow become lodged in the bowl, and that he's actually trying to wriggle free.

Marissa screams, darts forward, grabbing Alex by the waist, trying to pull him out. Inexplicably, *impossibly*, he's being flushed down the toilet. She tugs once, twice, three times. On the fourth tug, she slips and falls backward, hitting the wall hard. The breath knocked out of her, she watches in horror as Alex's upper half is swallowed by the bowl. The pipes knob a moment longer, then—

—silence.

Tears well in Marissa's eyes as the terrible reality of what's just happened starts to sink in. Trembling, she tries to get to her feet, slips, falls, tries again, falls—and freezes as motion from the toilet catches her attention. It's not Alex, whose lifeless lower half is draped over the side. This is something else, a pair of small, dung-covered hands cresting the rim of the bowl, followed by a dung-colored head with mischievous eyes pressed into a turd-textured face—

—Marissa screams.

Chapter 9

Kayleb

We're trying to get a Mac-formatted external hard drive to work with our Windows setup. Well, *I'm* trying. Noah's got his feet up on his desk, and is toying with his camera most unhelpfully.

"I swear," he says, looking annoyed, "if I get just one more Mac-formatted drive from a client, heads are going to *roll*."

"The industry is Mac," I tell him.

Noah aims his camera at the back of my head, snaps a picture. "The industry is stupid."

"*We're* stupid for bringing Windows to a Mac party."

"Dude, we're *cheap*, not stupid. Big difference."

"Not that big." Having adjusted some offending file permissions (hopefully for the better), I eject the hard drive from my PC, then swivel around in my chair and plug it into Noah's laptop. "Okay, try it now."

Noah swipes his finger over the touchpad, hits a couple of keys on the keyboard. After a moment he holds up his camera and takes a selfie of himself giving the hard drive the finger. "This is ridiculous. I should be Photoshopping pimples off the booties of wannabe pole-slammers, not playing tech support."

"I'm the one doing tech support," I say. "You're just...metabolizing."

"Splitting hairs, Kay-Kay..." Noah trails off, movement from outside catching our attention—

—namely Marissa, naked, wet, blood and dook smeared strategically across her breasts and between her legs as she stumbles onto our patio and starts banging frantically on the sliding glass door.

Noah's jaw drops.

I just gawk, not sure if I've entered into some kind of pornographic trance, or if what I'm seeing is actually real. "Dude. Dirty naked chick banging on our patio door."

"Uh-huh."

Marissa bangs some more, pleading to be let inside.

Suspending our disbelief, Noah and I jump from our chairs and open the door. By sheer luck, I'm the immediate recipient of a messy embrace as Marissa throws

herself into my arms and starts babbling almost incoherently.

"*OhmyGod*," she says, "there was this, this *thing*, this creature with tiny hands and beady little eyes and I don't know how, but Alex...he was stuck like that...right down the toilet and I was only trying to help but he...he...oh, this can't be happening—please tell me he's not dead!"

Noah steps in, tries to find a non-filthy part of her body on which to anchor a reassuring hand. Finding none, he feigns looking at his non-existent wristwatch and says, "Slow down. Start at the beginning. Who's Alex?"

"My *boyfriend!*" Marissa responds, looking like she can't for the life of her fathom why neither of us gets a single word she's saying.

"You have two boyfriends?"

"She means Doug," I say, putting two and two together.

"Wait—how does one get the nickname 'Alex' from 'Doug,' or vice versa?"

"Dumbass, Doug is *our* nickname for him. It has nothing to do with his real name."

Noah looks betrayed. "I wasn't aware of this—"

"Somebody *please* help Alex!" Marissa exclaims.

I frown as she presses herself deeper into my arms and breaks into a sobbing fit. Normally, I'd be delighted to be holding a smoking hot naked chick, but in this instance, reeking of weed and crap as she does, I'm finding myself conflicted. "Um...all right. Easy now. It's okay. I'm sure it's just...I'm sure Doug—Alex, I mean—is fine."

Camera still in hand, Noah gives Marissa's form an appreciative glance, starts to aim his lens at her bare bottom.

I wave at him, mouthing the words, "Stop!"

He acquiesces—but only because he's just noticed that Marissa is leaving dirty footprints wherever she steps. "First things first, darling. Let's get you out of our apartment and into some clothes." He backs toward the sliding glass door, motions for me to guide her out onto the patio.

* * *

A few minutes later, we've walked Marissa (now wearing a grossly oversized Kiss T-shirt, courtesy of one of our junk boxes) back to her patio. A horrendous stench wafts through the open sliding glass door.

"Oh, wow," Noah says, waving his hand in the air. "That is one heavy musk. You said you saw some kind of animal in your toilet, sweets?"

Marissa sniffles, wipes a rivulet of tears from her face. She's still wide-eyed and shaking, and makes a point of staying as far away from the door as possible. "I...I don't think it was an animal. It had arms and...and legs, and hands. Like...like a... oh, Jesus, I don't know what it was. Can you please just...just call someone?"

I pull out my phone.

"I'm sure it's nothing," Noah assures her, clasping her around the waist and holding her close.

"Yeah," I say, glaring at him. "Probably just a frog or a rat or something. Even possums are known to—"

"It wasn't *nothing*," Marissa hisses, and jerks out of Noah's grasp.

"This isn't the bayou, Kay-Kay," Noah says, looking disappointed.

"I know. I'm just saying."

He holds his nose and peers hesitantly into Marissa's living room. "Doug? Yo!"

"His name's Alex, dude."

"Easy mistake. Alex! You in there, buddy?"

No answer.

"Kay-Kay, pop inside and see if Al's all right."

"Why can't you go?" I ask.

"I'm looking after the lovely lass." He embraces Marissa. When she pushes him away again, he folds his arms, clears his throat. "Come on. Don't be a wuss."

Holding up my phone, I say, "I'm Googling a plumber."

"Rock-paper-scissors."

"What, are we twelve?"

"Come on, Kay-Kay. We haven't got all night. Alex could be..." No doubt about to say "dead," Noah catches himself in time, shoots Marissa a quick, awkward glance as he waters down the rest of his sentence: "...mildly inconvenienced. Now, rock-paper-scissors, biznatch."

"Fine." I sigh, holding out my hand.

"One, two, three!"

Noah chooses rock.

I pick scissors.

Damn.

"I hate you," I say, and put my phone away.

Stepping into Marissa's apartment, I move cautiously through the living room. It really stinks in here—no surprise considering the condition Marissa was in when she turned up on our doorstep. It's so bad I have to hold part of my shirt over my nose and mouth in a vain attempt to keep out the smell.

"Alex!" I call out. "It's Kayleb from next door. Are you there?"

He doesn't answer.

As I approach the bed and bath area, I notice (in addition to Marissa's fudgeprints) large sections of soggy carpet—evidence of a major plumbing accident steadily soaking its way into the rest of the apartment. "Um...it looks like you've got some kind of, er, leak here. Alex?" I step carefully around the puddles, following the dirty footprints through the bedroom and into the bathroom, which is a total disaster area. The walls and floor are splattered with dookie; a hefty pile of it fills the lazily-overflowing toilet bowl, the seat to which has been knocked off its hinges. There's a little blood speckled here or there, but Alex is nowhere to be found.

I'm not going to lie to you, I'm feeling a mite queasy right now. I mean, this is really, really nasty. There's no carpet shampooer, no cleanup crew or hazmat team in the world equipped to handle the sheer quantity of sick that's been summoned

forth tonight. Duane's just going to have to hire some guys to fill the bathroom with concrete and seal it off from the rest of human civilization forever.

I start to turn away—and pause, my gaze stuck on the mound in the toilet. It's not the dook itself that's caught my attention, but, rather, the appearance of what looks like a pair of beady eyes blinking at me from within—

—my cell phone rings.

Nearly jumping out of my skin, I fumble it out of my pocket. The caller ID reads, DOM. I ignore it and look back at the toilet.

The eyes are gone.

Or, more likely, they were never there to begin with.

Whatever. I've seen and smelled enough. I stumble back out of the apartment and onto the patio.

Noah holds up his phone. "Hey, I called Roto—"

And I'm puking.

"—Rooter."

Chapter 10

Noah

Marissa may be hot stuff, but that doesn't mean I'm okay with her having mucked up our patio and carpet. On the plus side, I've got an excuse to go shirtless and listen to AC/DC while doing cleanup. So, I guess it's not a total loss. Armed with a mop and a bucket, I'm taking care of the outies, Kay-Kay the ins (if you peek through the sliding glass door, you'll spot him crouching on all fours and scrubbing the carpet with an adorable amount of gusto). Over on her own patio, Marissa, now showered and more appropriately dressed, converses with a disinterested-looking police officer, and is trying unsuccessfully to convince him that Alex has indeed been flushed down her toilet.

Ty's watching me clean. He's got a bandana tied around the lower half of his face, and is eating a grapefruit as part of his two-pronged approach to dealing with the smell. "All over the walls, huh?" He chuckles amusedly.

"The walls, the floor, and most of little miss tight-bottom's nether regions." I nod in Marissa's direction.

"Damn. Talk about blazing. I've heard those two go on some crazy trips, but that's some seriously twisted cow patty."

"Literally."

"How much do you want to bet Alex is jacking it in some playground right about now?"

"We'll know if he comes back covered in wood chips."

Ty lifts his bandana, pops a grapefruit slice into his mouth. "Tell you what I'm going to do. First thing tomorrow morning I'm calling some building and safety on Duane. I told that cracker when we first moved in that the plumbing in these parts is wrecked. This just got real."

Marissa starts shouting: "Okay, maybe I had a little something to unwind, but I am *not* tripping, and I did *not* make this up! Even if I did, why would I go with such a ridiculous story? No, *you* listen to me! I don't care if it hasn't been twenty-four hours! My boyfriend's missing, possibly dead, and you're not doing anything about it!" She throws her arms wide and addresses the rest of the world. "Can I *please* talk to someone other than Officer Dumpling here?"

Heh. Officer Dumpling.

As he attempts damage control, Susan (just off work, judging by the skirt and jacket) makes her way over to me and Ty.

"Oh, my *Gawd*," she says. "It smells like Riverside. What in the world is going on?"

Ty gives her a hug. "Baby, we're using the bathroom down at the Snacks & Such tonight. That's what's going on." He gives me a nod and a wave, and, with his arm around a very confused-looking Susan, starts toward home. "Later, Photoshop."

I wave back, resume my cleanup effort, sparing neither nook nor cranny the bleach and dish soap treatment. Once I'm satisfied that the patio is barefoot-friendly again, I haul my gear inside, converging with Kay-Kay in the bathroom. We don't say anything at first, me emptying my bucket in the bathtub, Kay-Kay using the sink. Each of us keeps a nervous eye on the toilet until at last I frown and lower the seat, the lid.

"You're awfully quiet," I say, "for a guy who just cuddled with a nude swimsuit model."

"Correction," Kay-Kay replies. "Nude swimsuit model covered in dung."

"Doesn't matter. Her bikini line was planted firmly against your leg for a good forty-five to fifty seconds." I finish wringing out my mop, lean it against the wall to dry. "You think she bleaches her—?"

"I'm *thinking* that it's pretty bad luck to have moved into this apartment complex the very *day* before all hell breaks loose."

"Don't you dare bring up our *thing*."

"I wasn't going to bring up our *thing*..."

"Good, because I don't want to talk about our *thing*."

"...but now that you mention it, this it totally our *thing*."

"Kay..."

He shoots me a dirty look. "All right. Never mind."

"Fine with me." I start to undo my belt.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm going to run a little soapy water over my crack and crotch."

"How come you get to shower first?"

"Older brother, chain of command, and so forth." I drop my pants, shimmy out of my undies, start humming a cheerful tune as I step into the tub, draw the shower curtain, and turn on the water. I can't actually see Kay-Kay exiting the bathroom, but I know from past experience that he's probably all ZOMG in the face. He's got a thing about unencumbered wangs. Borderline phobia. I, on the other hand, am real about it. We've both got wangs—good ones, I might add, thanks to what's informally known as the Padalecki Curse. It's not a crime to let them out of their cages once in a while. The little brah just needs to accept that when you room with someone, you're going to see their junk eventually. Statistical fact.

I do my thing, ducking into the bedroom afterward for sweats and a T-shirt. Kay-Kay gives me the silent treatment as he slips wordlessly past for his turn at the

shower.

He slams the door.

Out in the living room, I sit at my desk and open my laptop, intending to check my e-mail (or whatever it is one does when running a business out of their dinky apartment)—but this is also my first moment alone all day. And it's been a long day. All this talk of wangs and naked supermodel neighbors has got me sporting tentative wood. Listening for the sound of running water coming from the bathroom, I pounce on the chance for a quick wank, loading up my favorite adult site in a new browser tab—

The doorbell rings.

Primal instinct kicks in, and I slam the laptop lid shut. After adjusting the crotch of my sweatpants, I get up from my desk and hobble over to the front door, peer through the peephole.

Brie's standing on the other side. She too appears to have just gotten out of the shower. Sans glasses, her wet hair freed from its usual ponytail, she looks less geek and more chic despite her trademark yoga shorts and T-shirt. She's got her laptop tucked under her arm, and is holding a plate of...cupcakes?

I open the door, making sure to keep my lower half out of sight at least until I'm down to a modest chubby. "Well, hello my little night flower."

Brie raises an eyebrow. "Um...what?"

"The hair, the no-glasses thing, the whole, 'I'm also a mascot for *Geeks Are Sexy* in my spare time' look..."

"If you say so. Is Kayleb around?"

"Kay-Kay's playing sink-the-battleship in the tub at the moment, but I've been authorized to handle his affairs in the meantime."

"Well, he promised he'd help me fix my laptop. So...here I am."

"That sounds like something Kay would do."

"Can I come in?"

"Uh, sure." I open the door wider and usher Brie inside. "*Entrare*."

She steps past me and into the living room. "I made gluten-free cupcakes as a thank-you, assuming Kayleb's not the cold hard cash type."

"Who, Kay-Kay?" I close the door, head immediately into to the kitchen, all the while keeping my crotch aimed away from Brie. Once I'm behind the counter, I pretend to be using the sink as I ogle her behind through the cut-out. She's not as robustly curved as Susan or Marissa, but she's definitely got shape, and is toned in all the right places. "Naw. He's a total cupcake whore. Give him anything with pink frosting on top, and he's happy as a school girl at a bake sale. Throw in some darjeeling and an episode of *Ugly Betty*, and you'll have him purring like a kitten."

Brie glances around the room, frowning at the stacks of boxes, which persist despite our having unpacked them hours before. "I love what you've done with the place. It's very...bachelor-esque."

"If it had been up to Kay-Kay, we would've stopped at Ikea for doilies and ruffled throw-pillows before anything else, but we've been a little busy today, what with the consecutive plumbing disasters."

"Is that what's going on?" Brie walks over to the patio door and peeks outside.

"Yep. Another bathroom-related mishap. Girl next door covered in poop. Boyfriend missing—"

"Dude!" Kay-Kay yells, barging into the room sopping wet and haphazardly holding a towel around his waist. "You totally left, like, a full head of hair in the shower drain! Is it too much to ask that you..." He trails off, noticing Brie. "Oh. Hi."

Brie holds up her laptop, the plate of cupcakes. "Cupcakes. PC repair."

I quietly jab my finger at Brie's behind and make a suggestive thrusting motion with my hips. When she's not looking, of course.

Kay-Kay ignores me, clears his throat, looks like he wants to run and hide under a rock. But he holds his ground. "Oh, right. Um, just let me...I just got out of the —let me throw some clothes on." He backtracks into the bedroom.

Brie faces me.

I abruptly cease my sex pantomime and lean casually against the countertop. "He likes to put on an Oxford and slacks before he handles a woman's hardware."

"Do you always have something witless to say?"

"Most of the time, yes." Why do I have the uncomfortable feeling that Brie can sense my waning boner through the cut-out? "Make yourself at home. I'm going to go check that the little brother remembered to wash behind his ears."

I duck into the bedroom and, not finding Kay-Kay, barge into the bathroom instead, where he's stumbling into a pair of jeans and a shirt.

He scowls when he sees me. "Ever heard of knocking?"

"Dude," I say, smiling amusedly and fingering his shirt, "are you fixing China Girl's computer or taking her to Napa Rose?"

Kay-Kay blushes, faces the mirror again, hastily deodorizes, brushes his teeth, fusses over his hair. "It's called fashion sense. Look it up sometime."

"This isn't fashion sense, it's putting a bowtie on the boner."

"It's not...I'm not...it's not *that*."

"Right."

"Really."

"Never mind that she was totally checking out your towel just now."

"She was?"

"Couldn't take her eyes off it, Kay-Kay."

"It's not like that. I'm just being the friendly neighbor."

"Then you won't mind if I be the horny neighbor? Because there's a super-cute college girl in our living room whose hyper-gym buns are literally devouring her yoga shorts as we speak. If you don't get out there right now, I'm going to consider this a forfeiture—"

Kay-Kay looks panicked. "No, this is absolutely *not* a forfeiture—" He catches himself, turns, and faces me. Putting on his best indifferent expression: "Why are we even having this conversation? She wants me to fix her laptop. That's all."

"Chicks go to Best Buy if they want their laptop fixed," I say, rolling my eyes. "They go to the geek next door if they want to do it doggy-style while draped over

a Mini-ATX case. Now, stop playing dress-up, and get out there and give Brie Cheese some sugar." I start to guide Kay-Kay out of the bathroom.

"Dude, your interest in my dating status is deeply disturbing."

"I'm done for, I'll admit it. Salsa Saturday was a bust. But that doesn't mean I can't live vicariously through you." I flick off the light as we go. "'Live for me,' just like in the Blue Öyster Cult song..." I push and shove the over-dressed caricature version of my little brother back out into the living room—

—where Brie is standing over my laptop.

Which she's opened.

And which is displaying the porn site I'd been browsing prior to her arrival.

"Who has the adult Web site subscription?" she asks, smirking over her shoulder.

I swallow hard, darting forward and yanking my laptop from her prying hands. "Do you always poke through your next door neighbors' things?"

Brie glares at me. "I was admiring your artwork here—" She gestures at my open sketchbook, several scattered drawings. "—when your laptop started moaning."

I clutch my traitorous laptop to my chest and hurry out of the room, muttering under my breath, "Stupid thing is supposed to go to sleep when you close the lid."

Chapter 11

Ty

Old Ben Franklin mentioned death and taxes in his now-famous letter to Jean-Baptiste Leroy, but if he'd written it today, he definitely would've included a third certainty: the clerk dude. For as long as anyone on Stucco Street can remember, he's been a fixture at the Snacks & Such, always present behind the register, never late. In fact, urban legend has it that he doesn't sleep, and has never gotten sick. You can stop in for a cup of coffee at six in the morning, and he'll be there. You can grab beer and condoms at half past midnight, and...he'll be there.

That's why I've got that curious, unsettled look on my face when, armed with a roll of toilet paper and a copy of *Oil Painting for Dummies* (laugh all you want, the *Dummies* books are effing tight), I stroll into the store to find the cash register unmanned, the aisles deserted.

"Yo, Habib!" I call out. "Where you at? I have to use the facilities!" I head toward the back of the store, sniffing, noticing the faint smell of feces in the air—as if there hasn't been enough of that tonight. I move over to one of the freezers, mutter under my breath, "No wonder nobody's here tonight. Place smells like poo." Knowing that the clerk dude's got a thing about only allowing paying customers to plant their butts on his toilet bowl, I pick out a can of iced tea and go up to the counter, add a bag of potato chips to my purchase. I wait a moment, looking around the empty store, listening.

The place is utterly dead.

"Yo, brother!" I bang on the counter. "Where you at? I've got some groceries that need ringing up!"

No answer.

"And I need one of those toilet tokens! I've got chips and a drink! I'll even sweeten the deal with some breath mints!" I grab a pack, set it beside the chips and iced tea. I wait a while longer, biting my lip as my bowels prep for delivery. When several more minutes pass without an appearance by the clerk dude, I head to the rear of the store, this time showing myself into the stock area. The smell here is stronger—and it immediately becomes obvious why: the clerk dude's taking a dump with the bathroom door cracked open. I have to pull my sweatshirt over my mouth and nose, it's so bad. "Man, what the hell's going on back here? It smells

like crap took a crap!" I reach the bathroom door—and stop.

There's a puddle of butt chowder oozing lazily out into the hallway.

I back off, grimacing. "*Ugh*. Nah-ah. No way. I'm all for supporting my local small business, but the toilet down at the gas station is cleaner than this—and it ain't clean!" I make tracks out of the Snacks & Such...

...and if this were a cheesy horror movie, this would be the part where the camera hangs back, tracks into the bathroom to reveal the clerk dude's dead friggin' corpse lying crumpled beneath an enormous mountain of doo.

If this were a cheesy horror movie.

Chapter 12

Noah

Impromptu hacking party at Kay-Kay's desk.

Brie's keeping watch over his shoulder as he works on her laptop. I, meanwhile, am scarfing her cupcakes with production line efficiency, and have a small collection of discarded paper liners piled in front of me. We've been chatting idly for the last hour (mumbling in binary, in Kay-Kay's case), but for the most part the dialogue has been pretty lame. Between the little brah's diagnostics and my gluttony, it's no surprise that Brie's attention eventually wanders to the book on curses that Kay-Kay thinks has been cleverly hidden between several programming manuals.

"Whose is this?" she asks, fingering the well-read volume.

"Mine," Kay-Kay answers with a blush.

"He thinks we're cursed," I elaborate, "and that wherever we go, we bring bad luck, doom, and destruction to those around us."

"That's totally not what I believe."

Brie smirks. "Yet you own a book on curses and how to defend against them."

Kay-Kay grabs the book and shoves it out of the way. "It's just a curiosity of mine. That's all."

Continuing to look amused, Brie, nosy snoop she is, picks up his phone. She swipes her finger across the touchscreen, raises an eyebrow. "Who's the blond chick?"

"Someone I know," Kay-Kay replies, wincing and taking the phone from her, stuffing it into his pocket.

"Ex-girlfriend, to be exact," I offer on his behalf. "Her name's Bridget. Psycho-babe. Stole Kay-Kay's heart, stomped on his soul. Keeps both in a jar underneath her bed. He hasn't been on a date since. Real tragic."

"She wasn't that bad. We just...differed on a lot of things."

"Replace 'a lot of things' with 'everything,' and 'differed' with 'created a voodoo doll of me and made it listen to Metallica's *Lulu* for two weeks straight.'"

Kay-Kay sends me a polite glare. "Can we not talk about this right now?"

"Whatever tickles your fancy." I finish my current cupcake, add its liner to the pile, pick up a fresh cake from the plate, examine it shrewdly before unwrapping it

and sending it down the hatch. I chew heartily (some would say loudly), and it's fully my intent to compliment Brie on her baking skills, but as luck would have it, I'm unable to get the words out due to a sudden and severe case of cupcake mouth.

"Shith," I mumble. "Thoo we haf amee miwk?" I get up from my seat and hurry into the kitchen.

Kay-Kay shakes his head, says, "My brother, the walking *Got Milk?* commercial."

"Weew fuwwy, affhoow." I open the fridge. Thankfully, the carton of Alta Dena we bought this morning is still half-full. I grab it and start gulping straight from the pour spout, unleashing a barrage of chilled lactose unto my cake-encrusted esophagus. Is there such a thing as a milkgasm? Because I think I feel the Earth moving—oh, wait.

That's the pipes starting to rattle and knob.

Accompanied by the sound of water splashing onto the kitchen floor.

I turn around.

No, not water.

I lunge at the sink, turn on the garbage disposal. This does nothing to regulate the murky, brown funk that's bubbling up from the left drain. If anything, I've made it worse—the knobbing has become even more offensive, and is causing the countertop to shudder and shake. I switch the disposal back off and, setting my milk carton down, start scooping handfuls of water into the right side of the sink in a futile attempt to relieve some of the overflow. As I work, the left side burps and sputters droplets of dump-water onto my clothes, hair, and face.

Holding his nose, Kay-Kay steps up to the cut-out.

"Um, little help!" I shout at him.

"What do you want me to do?"

"Grab some towels and line the doorway before the carpet gets marinated in sewer sauce!"

Kay-Kay nods, dashes into the bedroom.

Brie takes his place at the cut-out and murmurs something in Vietnamese.

I feel around inside the garbage disposal. "*Ugh.* It's like everyone in the building just took a simultaneous dump." Something catches on my hand. I grasp hard, give it a tug—and suddenly the sink begins to drain. I pull my hands out to discover I'm holding a large clump of braided black hair.

Kay-Kay rushes into the kitchen with the towels. "I got the..." He trails off, noting my haggard state, as well as the chunk of hair retrieved from the sink drain. "...towels."

I blink at him, spit foul-smelling water. "Is it just me, or does the plumbing in this building really, *really* suck?"

Brie gawks at the chunk of hair. "Is that...is that someone's *hair?*"

"It sure looks like it." I turn the braid around in my hands.

"But how...?" Kay-Kay asks. "I mean, that shouldn't even be...what?"

I set the braid on the countertop. "Well, if you two will excuse me, I'm going to gargle with some Clorox." I leave the kitchen, shutting myself in the bathroom and

performing some major oral hygiene. I don't think I've ever brushed my teeth so vigorously. Using my free hand, I pick various bits of stink from my hair. I'm kind of in a self-imposed daze, intent on compartmentalizing my various emotional pangs and gag reflexes at least until I'm in the shower. So, I'm not noticing that the bathtub has begun to fill with drain water. Murky at first, it becomes thicker and more like chili as it solidifies into what one might describe as a small child covered in dung. But, as I said, I'm not aware of any of this; I've just discovered a piece of corn stuck between my teeth—which is worrisome, because I haven't eaten any corn today.

Finished brushing, I splash some water onto my face, reach for a washcloth... and pause, sniffing the air, smelling fresh leavings—

—spotting the vague form in the bathtub.

"Hey, pretty-boy," it grunts with a chuckle.

I rub water from my eyes, the bathtub coming into horrible focus—

—okay.

There is *not* a three-foot-tall poop monster hopping over the rim and toddling toward me with its arms outstretched.

"Give us a kiss?" the poop monster coos.

I swallow, wide-eyed, stumbling backward, fumbling for the doorknob. "What...the...?"

"*Smooches!*" The poop monster lunges at me—

—I yank the door open, bolt out of the bathroom and past the kitchen (Brie Cheese and the brah are making an unenthusiastic attempt at cleaning up the sink mess), the sound of a little girl's scream escaping from the back of my throat. Only when I'm out of the apartment, down the hallway, and well into the parking lot, do I stumble to a halt to catch my breath.

"Yo, Photoshop."

There's that little girl screaming again.

Ty, having just stepped beside me, screams as well, dropping what looks like a *Dummies* book and a roll of toilet paper. "Don't *do* that!" he bellows.

"Don't do *that!*" I bellow back, and give him a weak, ineffective punch on the nearest of his massive shoulders.

"What's with you?"

"Nothing." Oh, but it's not nothing, now is it? It's the complete opposite of nothing. It's some...*thing*. "Okay, this is going to sound weird, but there's...I saw... back at my place...there's something in my bathtub."

Ty relaxes, nods knowingly. "One of those giant beetles, right? I get them all the time."

"No, no. It was like this little...like a..." I trail off, watching Ty crouch to retrieve his things. "Did you just take a crap in the bushes?"

Kay-Kay comes jogging up. "Dude. What was that all about? Are you okay?"

"No, I'm not. There's a...in our bathtub...I saw a..." Again I trail off, the same failsafe that keeps me from insisting on sleeping with a nightlight now vice-gripping my tongue to prevent me from saying something stupid out loud.

Kay-Kay and Ty wait.

"If I tell you what I saw," I say, "you have to promise not to laugh or call me crazy."

"Uh, all right," Kay-Kay says.

"No problem," Ty adds.

Forgive me if I'm not so easily convinced. "You've got to *promise*."

Kay-Kay rolls his eyes. "Okay, I promise."

"Don't say it if you don't mean it."

"What do you want me to do? Pinky swear? Cross my heart and hope to die? Swear a blood oath?"

I take a deep breath, astounded that the following words are coming out of my mouth: "There was a little man in our bathtub."

Looking at Ty, then back at me, Kay-Kay asks, "What, like a midget or something?"

"Little person," Ty corrects.

"What?"

"That's what you're supposed to call someone of a smaller stature. Little person."

"No, Bernie Mac," I say, "it wasn't a midget—a little person. It was...it looked like a...poop...monster."

Kay-Kay deadpans me. "A poop monster." Not a question, but a matter-of-fact statement.

I nod.

"Okay, not funny. That janitor dude's been dead less than a day, and already you're cracking jokes?"

"Yeah, Photoshop," Ty agrees. "Way too soon."

"See, I knew this would happen," I say, and shake my head.

"There's jokes, and then there's—"

"This is *not* a joke! It was a little, er, poop monster—" Holy crap, something just occurred to me. "—like what Marissa saw!"

"Or what Marissa *said* she saw," Kay-Kay points out.

"You promised!" I jab my finger at him, start walking back toward the apartment.

Kay-Kay and Ty follow.

"I promised I wouldn't laugh or call you crazy," Kay-Kay clarifies. "I'm not doing either of those—I'm saying you're full of crap."

"Same difference!"

Brie and Susan are waiting outside the opened front door.

"Is everything okay?" Brie asks. She's got her laptop tucked under her arm.

"Noah thinks he saw something in our bathroom," Kay-Kay explains.

I peer inside the apartment. "Screw you. I know what I saw." Although I'm seriously regretting ever having used the words "poop" and "monster" in the same sentence. Even if I really did see the little creep, I should've played it off as a raccoon, brought the gang with me into the bathroom, and *then* revealed, in the

presence of irrefutable fecal evidence, that I had indeed witnessed living, breathing, talking poop. Just so we'd all be on the same page.

Ty hands Susan the *Dummies* book, the roll of toilet paper. "Ladies, gentlemen. Allow me." He steps inside.

Kay-Kay follows after a moment. As he passes me, he whispers, "Wuss."

I glance at Brie and Susan, both of whom are watching me expectantly, and I chuckle, embarrassed. "You know, Ty was right. It was probably just...I have a thing about giant...insects..." Ah, fug. Clearing my throat, I duck inside, ignore the kitchen-sewage situation, move cautiously into the hall. It looks like Ty's just lost a round of rock-paper-scissors to Kay-Kay, and opens the bathroom door slowly, peers inside. There are dirty footprints trailing from the bathtub, a rumpled towel on the floor from when I'd made my hasty exit—but no poop monster.

I point at the footprints. "See? There. Footprints."

"Bro, all I see is a bunch of crap," Ty says. Holding his nose, he steps into the bathroom.

I'm right behind him, suspiciously eyeing the toilet, the bathtub, the cabinet under the sink. Over my shoulder, I spot Kay-Kay hanging back near the door. Brie and Susan have joined him. They, too, are holding their noses, and obviously have no desire to enter any further.

Ty pulls aside the shower curtain, lifts the toilet seat. Nada on both counts. He faces me and shrugs.

I bite my lip, weighing the odds in my head that an actual poop monster attacked me and is now crawling around our apartment—versus the far more likely scenario that I've simply got a touch of the PTSD from what happened at the kitchen sink.

"Look," Kay-Kay says, "we had this discussion with Marissa. It was probably a possum or—"

"Says the guy whose last online purchase was a book on *curses*."

"—some other kind of *rational* explanation."

"Those are baby poop monster footprints. I'd swear on our mother's grave if she weren't still alive."

Susan clears her throat. "Okay, I'm just a little confused right now. Can someone *please* tell me what's happening?"

Before anyone can answer, Dwade, still wearing a bathrobe for goodness knows why, and looking none too pleased, steps up behind the girls. "I'll tell you what's happening," he says, startling them. "It's nine o'clock in the after-hours, and I've got a major noise disturbance getting my tenants riled up. All of y'all—" He snaps his finger authoritatively. "—in my office. Now."

Chapter 13

Kayleb

There are two things you can do when you're in trouble: stand up for yourself, or try to turn invisible. Sitting crammed beside the others on Duane's office sofa as he locks the door and closes the blinds, clearly I've chosen attempted invisibility.

Noah's just the opposite. Wedged between Susan and myself, he leans forward immediately and points an accusing finger at Duane. "You need to call a plumber, or animal control, or at least post notices on everyone's door, because there is something *majorly* funky going on with the pipes in our building. We've got no hot water, dook is literally pouring out of our kitchen sink, and there are..." He pauses a moment, looking self-conscious. "...small animals leaving paw-prints all over people's bathroom floors."

"One thing at a time, apple bottom," Duane says, and sits behind his desk, casually pulls a bottle of tequila and a glass from one of the drawers. He pours himself a shot, downs it, leans back as he regards us coolly. "Now, what's this I hear about y'all running around the complex and wailing like banshees?"

"Actually," I say, nodding at Noah, "he was the only one screaming."

Noah glares at me. "Thanks for that, Kay."

Duane pours himself another drink. "See, we here at Lovéren Apartment Homes observe a strict no-noise policy after nine. Don't want to upset the ambiance, now do we?"

"*Ambiance?*" Ty raises an eyebrow. "Like when that Marissa gal screams bloody murder out her open bedroom window every time her boyfriend lays some pipe?"

Susan murmurs, "TMI, darling."

"Hey, now," Duane says, downing his second shot with a quick, well-practiced motion. "Good lovemaking always gets a pass."

"Amen," Noah agrees.

Folding her arms, Susan looks the other way. "Apparently 'good' and 'loud' are the same thing in these parts."

"Well, loud usually means good," Brie suggests, "though not necessarily the other way around."

Everyone looks at her in surprise.

"I'm just saying," she adds, blushing.

(Noah gives me a supportive nudge and nods subtly in her direction.)

Ty, meanwhile, shakes his head, fixes Duane with a heated expression. "Let's stay on topic. Noah here's too nice to come right out and say it, but after a day like today, you need to hear the truth."

"And what would that be?" Duane asks. Coolly.

"Your sorry ass keeps cutting corners with the maintenance. Leaky faucets, finicky dishwashers—"

"Plastic toilet seats," Susan interrupts.

"—plastic friggin' toilet seats! The place is old as Ice-T's nut-sack, and it's starting to swallow mofos up whole as it sinks into the Earth, and you're sitting here tossing back the drinks!"

Duane frowns. "I don't know if I like this whole blame game business. I've already got a dead custodian, God rest Juan's eternal soul, a missing tenant, and now y'all waltz in here suggesting that somehow I'm to blame for every little thing that's ever gone wrong. You want to start throwing around wild accusations? How's this for a headline: 'String of grotesque bathroom mishaps hits peaceful, picturesque, award-winning apartment community same weekend brothers Noah and Kayleb Padalecki roll into town.'" He leans back in his chair.

Always coolly.

"Are you trying to put that on *us*?" Noah asks, flabbergasted.

"I'm not saying I am, I'm not saying I'm not."

"What *are* you saying?"

"You can find fault with anyone if you look hard enough." Duane takes out his cell phone. He pulls up a video, holds his phone out for us to see.

"What the hell is this?" Ty grumbles, recognizing himself on the screen.

"Security camera footage of, oh, Mr. Universe here, about to dump and run."

I lean forward along with everyone else. In the video, this giant, hulking African dude (aka, Ty) can be seen tossing a swollen trash bag into one of the complex's garbage bins—or, rather, he hurls the bag in the general direction of the bin, watches as it lands on the ground beside, and walks away.

"Aw, hell no!" Ty exclaims. "You do *not* have hidden cam footage of me on your phone!"

Mocking Ty's tone, Duane replies with, "Aw, hell no, you do *not* just leave your garbage wherever you please!"

Susan face-palms herself. "Really, Ty..."

"What? So I didn't actually get the trash bag *in* the dumpster. It was one time—*one* time!"

Duane loads another video, this one of Brie in the laundry room. On finding all the dryers occupied, she opens one, dumps the previous tenant's load onto a nearby table, and proceeds to put her own things inside.

"Now, now, Miss Lin," Duane says. "You know you're supposed to wait for the previous tenant to remove their laundry before putting in your own."

"If I did that," Brie says, "I'd end up waiting until Monday morning for a dryer."

Though we all undoubtedly sympathize, mob rule dictates that the group appraise her accusingly.

She clasps her laptop against her chest. "Everyone does it."

"I've saved the best for last," Duane continues, cueing up a third video. This time it's Noah, attempting to get a cinnamon roll from the vending machine. The delivery mechanism has gotten stuck halfway through the vending process, and Noah's banging on the front panel with his fist, to no avail. Glancing over his shoulder to make sure no one's looking, he grabs the machine on both ends and starts trying to rock it in order to dislodge the cinnamon roll. Actual results: a grown man looking like he's humping a vending machine in broad daylight.

Duane lets the video play out for several more seconds before tapping the stop button.

We all shift our accusing stares over to Noah.

"In my own defense," he says, "I ended up having to pay another dollar-fifty to get the stupid thing to come out. Doesn't that count for something?"

Duane puts his phone away, leans back in his chair once again. "Now, the littering, the mishandling of personal belongings, the vandalism, the noise violation—I could be a real prick and go to the owner, make a big deal over small potatoes. Or we can compromise."

"Compromise?" I ask, totally not liking the way he'd just pronounced "compromise."

"I couldn't help noticing y'all are a bunch of strapping, able-bodied, tight-bottomed young ladies and gents."

Here we go...

"And I'm not blind to the ways of city life. I know the score. I know why you're here, living with the welfare moms and the deadbeats instead of yucking it up over in Laguna or Palos Verdes. It's a money issue, isn't it?" He looks at Brie. "Working off your student loan..." At Ty and Susan. "...paying down the ol' credit cards..." At Noah and myself. "...trying to start your own home business. But you can't do any of that if every paycheck goes to rent and utilities, right?" He gets out of his seat, starts pacing slowly. "But let's say that—theoretically, of course—I were to produce my own adult film. Let's say, hypothetically, that I just happen to have a small camera crew waiting back at my place. Let's say that, in this alternate universe, I were to offer each of you cash on the barrelhead to take it off in front of said camera crew. No genital penetration, no hanky-panky." He looks hopefully at Ty and Susan. "Unless, of course, you're into that sort of thing, in which case it'll be the hankiest of panky, as well as a substantial bonus."

Wow. Just...wow.

Susan appears to be awestruck. "Are you asking us to be in a porn video?"

Duane waves his hands disarmingly. "No, no. Of course not—though if I *were*, it would be strictly art house. Church naked, not adult site thirty-day trial naked. Unless you're into that. Just give me a few good minutes in front of the camera, make some extra cash, and all past transgressions are forgotten." He holds up his cell phone.

"I don't believe this. You're *totally* asking us to do a porno!"

"Darling, don't be so conservative. We're living in the Internet Age. Sooner or later everyone turns up naked online."

"Yeah, well, not us!"

"Agreed," Brie adds.

"Again, we're only talking theoretical possibilities here, my darling Miss Lin. I wouldn't *dream* of actually asking you to do anything you're uncomfortable doing. Unless you're into it. These are just tangents, *possible* opportunities. If you catch my drift."

Noah clears his throat. "Look. Hypothetical, er, tangents aside, something really needs to be done about the plumbing in our building. Are you going to take care of it or not?"

Duane eyes him suggestively. "That depends. What are you going to do for me?"

"I've heard enough." Ty gets to his feet. "To hell with this. To hell with *you*, Duane—"

Susan grabs him by the arm, tries to get him to settle down. "Baby—"

"I'm *not* going to be blackmailed by some crazy-ass white bread wannabe pornographer..." He trails off, listening along with the rest of us as a horrendous knobbing noise begins to emanate from the bathroom.

Noah's eyes go wide. "I don't like that sound. Bad things happen whenever I hear that sound."

Duane leaves his desk, walks to the rear of the office, flicks on the bathroom light. The toilet is overflowing liberally. "Damn," he mutters. He grabs a plunger, drops to his knees, kicks the door part of the way closed, and starts plunging. Calling out: "Okay, I'll admit the pipes may be a little old and the paint a little chipped, but what do you expect for under two-thousand a month?"

The knobbing continues; the toilet overflow goes from soup to chili. All of us have shifted on the sofa, and are now watching Duane as what can only be described as a spectacle unfolds.

"It's an old building. She's got quirks. You just have to know where she likes to be touched." Despite his confidence, though, his plunging seems to be having little effect. If anything, he's made it worse. He stops for a moment, catching his breath. There's poop smeared across his face. Dollops are stuck in his hair. "This is just a case of complacency. I can't tell you how many times a tenant will phone in a maintenance request for something trivial that they can take care of themselves. A pair of common household pliers will unclog a slow-draining bathtub drain just as well as Juan would. God rest." He resumes his efforts.

By now we've approached the bathroom *en masse*. Ty pushes the door the rest of the way open, and we stare, mesmerized. Duane, still on his knees and soaking in putrid excrement, wrestles with the toilet, simultaneously working the plunger while jiggling the handle with his other hand.

My phone rings. I fumble it from my pocket and answer without taking my eyes off Duane or the toilet. "Hello? Dom...yeah—I mean, no, um, we're still

working through some—"

Duane flicks a giant blob of poop from his forearm.

"—technical difficulties. No, no. Nothing, er, serious. Just a PC versus Mac thing. Hey, can I let you go? We're kind of right in the middle of something. Yeah, tomorrow morning. I didn't forget. Bright and early. Gotcha. Bye." I end the call.

Almost disappointingly, the water in the toilet bowl finally begins to drain.

Duane sets down the plunger, gets to his feet, faces us. He's slightly out of breath. "Another of life's problems easily solved with a little patience and determination—"

Suddenly the toilet belches.

Barfs up a poop-water geyser.

That drenches Duane to the bone.

And just as quickly settles.

We gawk collectively—only it's not Duane we're looking at anymore, it's the thing standing upright in the toilet bowl.

Noah's poop monster.

Duane, who's facing our direction, has absolutely no idea what's happening in the background. He still thinks we're wide-eyeing him, and subsequently spits blackwater, spreads his dung-covered hands, looks more than a little embarrassed. Quietly, he asks, "Well, what do you want me to say?"

The poop monster farts loudly.

Duane swallows hard, turns and faces the toilet.

The poop monster smiles at him and, in a voice that's a cross between Gary Busey and Harvey Fierstein, asks, "What do the last three seasons of *Sliders* and myself have in common?"

No one answers.

"We're both crap!"

Duane screams and topples onto the floor as the poop monster hops out of the toilet and dives at him, locking its legs around his neck and force-feeding him handfuls of itself.

For the second time tonight, Noah screams like a little girl.

"Oh, screw this!" Ty grabs Susan by the hand, bolts for the door.

The rest of us follow suit, stumbling over each other as we exit the office and run for the parking lot.

Someone's dog starts barking.

Another tenant yells out his window: "Shut the hell up!"

I can't tell if he's referring to us or the dog.

Duane

This is some grade-A whacked-out *Boulder Dash*. But Duane Bourbon didn't get where he is by losing his cool in a sticky situation. We can argue till the cows come home about *why* there's a sludge-monkey shoving me the goods, but what matters

is that there *is* a sludge-monkey—and I'm not about to be made its bitch. One of my eyes has been caked over with do, but I can see well enough with the other that I'm able to wrench a wad of toilet paper from the dispenser nearby. I dab at the monster's face, noticing that one, it's fugly as all get-out. Two, it's got some kind of tattoo or symbol on its forehead. I manage one really good smear, basically wiping the expression from the lower half of the monster's face. It doesn't work like I'd expected—this creature isn't just covered in poo, it's *made* of it!—but it's enough to get the monster swearing profusely as it lurches off of me. With a well-placed kick, I send it stumbling backward and into the toilet. Before it has a chance to recover, I slam the lid closed and jerk the handle, praying to God the damned thing works. Praise Him, the tank empties, flushing the little turdster down the drain.

The tank refills.

Quiets.

I spit, cough, grab some more toilet paper, wipe large globs of dookie from my face. I haul myself to my feet, stagger over to the sink; I stick my face under the faucet, trying to clear my eye and wash the sewage out of my mouth. My stomach is grumbling something fierce—I feel like I just ate, well, really bad Chinese food out of a toilet bowl.

Goddamnit, nobody backs Duane Bourbon into a corner!

Clutching my abdomen, I hobble out of the bathroom and over to my desk, taking a seat, opening one of the drawers, and fishing out a tin of breath mints. I pop about a dozen of them into my mouth, then pick up my phone. Hands trembling, I swipe through my contacts until I find my emergency plumber guy. Momentarily: "Hey. You need to get someone down here right away. I've got a major plumbing crisis on my hands. It's some kind of...well, I don't know what the hell it is, but it crawled out of the toilet and attacked me, and I think I got some of it in my mouth, and I...I..." I tense as I feel my gag reflex suddenly kick in. I start to get up, plotting an emergency course back to the bathroom before—

—too late. An unholy barrage of vomit erupts from my mouth, splashes across the desktop, spilling over the edges, soaking the carpet. That's just the first heave. The second hits me with even more force. I cup my hand over my mouth, but the puke seeps and squirts between my fingers. It's like when you put your thumb over the nozzle of a garden hose on full blast. This goes on for a good eight to ten seconds before, at last, the flow eases up.

I spit some more, thick ropes of sick dangling from my lips. The desk has been absolutely *inundated*. I press my phone to my ear once again. "Let me call you back."

Chapter 14

Kayleb

It becomes obvious after just a few minutes on the road that, really, we're driving quickly to nowhere, and that none of us has any game plan whatsoever. Heck, we didn't even ask Ty if we could ride with him; we just piled haphazardly into his truck while he was in the process of backing haphazardly out of the parking lot.

"Is everyone, er, all right?" I ask, finally breaking the silence.

Brie, sandwiched between me and Noah in the back, shoots me a heavy-lidded stare. "Define 'all right' within the current context."

"Like...any, uh, sprained ankles or broken bones?"

"I got poo on my shirt," Ty reports.

"We should call someone," suggests Susan. With shaky hands, she fumbles her phone out of her pocket.

"Who?"

"The police, animal control—"

"And tell them what?"

Awkward silence.

"To be clear," I say slowly, "we all agree that we just saw, er, a three foot tall... *creature* climb out of a toilet and attack our landlord, right?"

Noah scowls. "I've been saying that all evening."

More awkward silence.

Stopping at a red light, Ty takes the opportunity to quickly pull off his shirt and chuck it out the window.

"Don't do that!" Susan complains.

Ty ignores her, reaches for the dash, switches on the radio. "How about a little music?" A-ha's "Take On Me" is playing. Looking pleasantly surprised, he bites his lip and tilts his head so that he's facing slightly away from everyone else. "Eff yeah," he mutters under his breath, clearly fighting the urge to bob his head—until Susan glares at him. He blushes, clears his throat, and quickly turns the radio back off.

The light changes.

Drive to nowhere resumed.

I take out my phone and do a Google search for "poop monster" (don't laugh). After swiping past various memes and YouTube videos of babies messing

themselves, I eventually find a Wikipedia page for "fecal golem."

Reaching across Brie to nudge Noah, I say, "Dude. Fecal golem."

He looks up. "Fecal *what* now?"

"It's like a regular golem, but made from fecal matter instead of clay." I hold my phone up for him (and thus Brie, via proxy) to see.

"A 'regular golem' being...?" Ty asks.

I read from the Wikipedia page: "'A creature ordained from out of innate material or an inanimate object. Usually mud, or clay—'"

"Poop," Noah mutters. "He's going to say poop."

"'—or, rarely, human feces—'"

"Called it."

"—which would fall under the scatomancy umbrella. That's 'the technique of using one's own excrement or the excrement of others to predict the future or cast evil spells.'"

Noah shakes his head. "How in the world according to Garp did you find a Web page on poop monsters?"

"Google. And this guy's Facebook profile." I'd found it while browsing somewhere between "poop monster" and "fecal golem." The dude's name is Scatman. Balding, glasses, slightly overweight, I'd say he's in his late thirties or early forties. Noah and Brie take turns checking out his page. It's mostly photos of his shop, as well as notes and links to scatological-themed articles. Gallery of note: "Famous Poop" (celebrity stool samples purchased from select "art" dealers).

"*Scatman?*" Brie asks. "You're kidding, right?"

I wish I was. "No, look. He's a scatomancer, someone who's affluent in the practice of scatomancy. And he has an occult shop right here in town."

"I can't believe we're actually talking about this right now."

"You know the ancient proverb. 'If it exists, it can be Googled.'"

Noah passes the phone to Susan. "So, this is our go-to guy? A dude named Scatman who has a gallery of celebrity stool samples on his Facebook page?"

"He's got over a thousand followers," I point out.

"This has *got* to be a joke," Susan says.

"Well, it's the best I could do on a moment's notice."

No one argues with that.

"Does anyone have any better ideas?"

No one has any of those, either.

Noah nudges Brie. "Are you on Facebook?"

"Yeah."

"Friend this poop guy and see if he's online."

"Okay, I am *not* going to add a *poopomaniac*—"

"Scatomancer," I interrupt as Susan hands my phone back.

"—scatomancer or whatever to my friends list. I mean, if he's into poop, who knows what else turns him on?"

"It's just for the time being," Noah promises. "You can delete him after."

"Real nice. Add someone just long enough to get what I want from him and

then unfriend him immediately after? No. You add him to *your* friends."

"Oh, *that's* not creepy."

Brie frowns. "Why's it creepy?"

"Guys don't add other guys to their friends list unless they already know them in person."

Brie looks at me for confirmation.

"He's got a point," I say. "I'm just some dude. But you're a pretty Asian girl. More flies with honey than vinegar and all that."

"So, this guy's a fly, and you're vinegar?"

"Yes," Noah affirms. "We're vinegar. Now, be a good little honeybee and make friends."

Brie sighs, takes out her phone. "Fine. I'll add the poop master to my friends. But I swear to God, if he turns out to be some psycho stalker—"

"He won't," I assure her. "I promise."

"I'm sure he'll be a class act," Noah adds, not even trying to hide the sarcasm, and leans over, nudges me in the ribs. He whispers, "Dude."

"What?" I whisper back.

"That's a total gray area." He points at Ty.

"What are you talking about?"

"The bet's off."

"What bet?"

"Fit or fat. It's off."

"No it isn't."

"Um, yeah it is. Our man's *clearly* got more than a little bread in his basket."

Which is true (this I ascertain by casually leaning forward and examining Ty's bare abdomen). But he's also somehow got abs at the same time. "*And* he's clearly got a six-pack. The glass is half full, the glass is half empty."

Noah pays Ty's bod another critical look. "The glass is *clearly* more than half full."

"Okay. Arnold Schwarzenegger in *Rise of the Machines*. Not at the top of his game, but clearly not a fat-ass."

"There's a reason," Noah says, "they shot the Desert Star Club scene from the shoulders up." He waits for me to respond—purposely cutting me off when I do. "Total fat-ass."

"But—"

"Pudding city."

"Dude—"

"William Shatner sucking in his gut on the set of *Star Wars 6: The Undiscovered Country*."

"*You mean Star Trek 6: The Undiscovered Country.*"

"Same difference."

"Excuse you?"

Noah rolls his eyes. "Not the *Trek* is better than *Wars* thing again."

"I never said *Star Trek* is better than *Star Wars*. It's just that when you say

stupid crap like 'same difference—'"

"Here we go."

"—*Trek* is not *Wars*. As iconic as George Lucas' original trilogy was, *Trek* was there first, it was a social statement, lavish hypotheticals on a shoestring budget. It was the first interracial kiss ever broadcast on American TV—it was babes of the week."

"Whatever. Quality versus quantity. Princess Leia. Slave bikini. *Return of the Jedi*."

I start counting off on my fingers. "Uhura, Nurse Chapel, Yeoman Rand—the original series. Deanna Troi, Tasha Yar, Ensign Ro Laren—*The Next Generation*. Kes, B'Elanna Torres, Seven of Nine—*Voyager*. Lieutenant T'Pol, Hoshi Sato—*Enterprise*. Michael Burnham—*Discovery*. Fifty-plus years of quality *and* quantity."

"Michael's a dude's name. And no amount of nubile girl flesh will ever make up for *Star Trek 5: The Search for God*. Or the fact that in *The Next Generation*, Worf was the *worst* security guard in the history of Starfleet. Hell, in the history of security guards."

"I just have one thing to say to you: Jar Jar Binks."

Noah perks his ear with his hand. "Um, how many times was the *Enterprise* boarded by hostile aliens under Worf's watch?"

"*Attack of the Clones*. N'Sync cameo."

"*TNG*, season 1, episode 25: 'Conspiracy.' Seventy-year-old white dude knocks Worf out cold with a love-tap to the back of the neck and a gentle shove across the room."

"*Jar Jar Binks—*" I trail off, realizing that both Noah and myself have become the focus of everyone's attention.

"Are you two finished?" Brie asks.

Noah blinks at me.

I blink back. "Yeah."

"Pretty much." He clears his throat, nods at Brie. "How's our poopologist friend coming along?"

Brie puts her phone away. "Not surprisingly, he doesn't have any plans tonight, and would love to talk dook with me."

Noah holds up his hand for a high-five. "All right."

Brie intentionally ignores him.

He lowers his hand.

"There's just one thing," she adds.

"What's that?"

"He wants a stool sample."

Chapter 15

Kayleb

I've never seen a poop doctor's shop before. Scatman's is nestled between a dozen or so other stores lining the old town strip, and is fairly nondescript, save for a lavish plaque hung above the door that reads: SCATOMANCY & OTHER ODDITIES OF THE OCCULT. Ty pulls up, kills the engine, and we pile out of the truck. We've sandwich-bagged a few collected dung nuggets that had made the trip—Scatman's stool sample, as it were.

"Here, you be the bearer of gifts," Noah says, and holds the sandwich bag out to me at arm's length.

My phone vibrates. "No thank you." I check the caller ID. It's Dom.

"Hey, I harvested it from the bottom of everyone's shoes with my car keys. I did my part."

"And we all applaud you for it." Answering Dom's call: "Yeah, Dom? Interactive menu. Got it. I didn't forget."

"Take it."

"What? No, don't even worry about Internet Explorer 6. Anyone who still uses that or Windows XP deserves to have a hard time viewing your site."

"*Take it.*"

"Yeah, look, I've got to go. I'll text you when it's done. For sure. Got it. Right. Okay, then. Bye." I end the call.

"*Taaake iiiit...*" Noah literally forces the poop bag into my hands.

"Fine. If it'll shut you up." I take it, leading the way to Scatman's doorstep.

Brie rings the bell.

Momentarily, Scatman answers. He's got on a pair of oven mitts, and is holding a plate of freshly-baked mini-pizzas. He looks particularly thrilled to see Brie. "Brianna, darling! You're even lovelier in person!" He kisses the back of her hand, balancing the plate of pizzas precariously in the process.

Brie glares at me, whispers, "You owe me for this."

I clear my throat. "Uh, I'm Kayleb. This is my brother, Noah." I gesture at Ty and Susan. "That's Ty and Susan."

"All good people," Scatman says, and lets us inside. He closes the door, heads for the rear of the shop, motions for us to follow. "Right this way, boys and girls."

We fall into step, taking in the details of the shop as we go. There are bookshelves crammed with voluminous tomes, display cases holding various oddities, tables cluttered with New Age trinkets. It's almost like a more modern version of Mr. Wing's shop from *Gremlins*. With mini-pizzas.

"So, you're a, um...a dung specialist?" Ty asks.

"The dictionary term is 'scatomancer,'" Scatman replies, "but no worries. Just call me Scat. Everyone does."

Noah eyes a card game box with SH*T HAPPENS printed across the side. "And you...tell people's fortunes by reading their, er, leavings?"

"I admit I'm probably not the most popular kid on the block, but I can't tell you how many times I've had someone come running in here at two in the morning asking if I can give them a little insight before a big job interview, a cross-country move, a tentative marriage proposal, yada-yada."

"Really?" asks Susan.

"Well, no. But I sure came in handy tonight, didn't I?"

Susan looks unimpressed.

Scatman leads us through a beaded doorway and into the back room of the shop. As evidenced by the bed, dresser, television set, table, chairs, fridge, and hot-plate, this would appear to be his living space, too. "Truthfully, most of what I carry are porno mags and how-to-do it manuals." He pops one of the mini-pizzas into his mouth and winks at Brie. "But a little cross-merchandising never hurt the ol' bottom line, right?"

Brie's smile couldn't be more uncomfortable.

Setting his plate on the tabletop, Scatman fetches a pitcher of water and an antique-looking wooden bowl, sets them on the table as well. Then he sits, gestures for us to do the same. (There aren't enough chairs, so Ty and Susan end up sharing a perch on a rickety stool.)

Once everyone's settled in, Scatman pops another pizza into his mouth, rubs his hands together, and says, "Let's get down to business. You say you've got a fecal golem problem?"

"Fecal golem." I glower knowingly at Noah. "Told you so."

"Shaddup," Noah glowers back.

Brie shakes her head, embarrassed. "I can't believe I'm actually saying this, but... yeah."

Scatman smiles at her. "Don't be bashful, darling. I deal with this kind of crap all the time." He waits a second before chuckling, glancing at the rest of us. "Get it? Crap?"

Noah and I smile accordingly; Susan rolls her eyes and folds her arms; Ty frowns, his giant pecs flexing in a most unamused manner.

"Never mind," Scatman continues. "Just a little joke to break the ice. Now, before we begin, as y'all are first-time clients, I'm going to have to ask for a small retainer up front. However..." He smiles at Brie again. "...since I'm such a nice guy, I'm going to give you my Facebook friends discount. Forty buckaroos for the consultation, half off any store purchases."

"That's very kind of you," Noah says. "Kay-Kay, pay the man."

I shoot him a look.

"What? I forgot my wallet at home."

I pull out my wallet and remove two twenties, which I hand to Scatman.

He takes the bills, stuffs them into his pocket. "Thank you. *Muchos apprecianados*."

Noah leans over and whispers into my ear, "You always did spend your money on crap."

Scatman pops yet another pizza into his mouth. He gestures at the sandwich bag. "I take it that's our stool sample?"

"Yeah," I reply, and am only too happy to slide it over to him.

He opens the bag, empties the contents into his bowl, pours in some water from the pitcher. Then, much to everyone's disgust, he closes his eyes and starts palpitating the dook with his bare hands.

"Oh, yeah," he murmurs, concentrating. A morsel squishes loudly between his fingers. "Oh, *yeah*, you've got some bad mojo going on here. Definitely a fecal golem brought on by your average, everyday ordained metaphysics."

"Great," Ty snorts. "So, how did the damned thing end up in our plumbing?"

"Basically, the golem does its creator's bidding. It handles their dirty work, etcetera. A hired hitman, if you will. You all saw the golem, right?"

"Yeah," I reply.

"Describe him for me."

"Well," Noah says, "he was three feet tall and made of crap, and he had a voice like Brian Johnson."

"Mm-hm. That's in line with what I'm sensing. Three feet tall, fecal complexion, gravely pipes."

Noah looks irked. "I just said that."

"Behave." Brie jabs him in the side.

Eyes still closed, brow still furrowed in concentration, Scatman pushes on. "Yeah...these little tykes aren't inherently evil *per se*, though the circumstances associated with their creation are oftentimes malevolent in nature. I mean, servants or laborers made of clay, that's one thing. But when you have a golem that's been crafted from good ol' all-American feces, well, it pretty much goes without saying that mischief is the maker's intent. Some kind of prank—or payback, maybe."

Ty looks confused. "Wait, so someone made this poop monster to get back at someone for...something?"

Scatman opens his eyes, suddenly suspicious. "I don't know. Do you have any enemies?"

Noah shrugs. "Every girl I've ever dated." He nods at me. "Wheat gluten."

"Guys, be serious," Brie sighs.

"Just out of curiosity," I say, watching as Scatman continues to play with the stool sample, "how does one go about making a fecal golem in the first place?"

"Someone volunteers a bowel movement," Scatman answers, "which is then primed with the addition of a catalyst fluid. Typically blood or semen for

benevolent purposes, vomit or urine for when you want to get down and dirty. The mixture is then activated with certain specific incantations—demonic chanting, to grossly oversimplify."

A rapid-fire flashback sends me into a temporary daydream—Salsa Saturday, me in the clubhouse, dropping Doug's phone into the dock, glancing at the touchscreen and noticing the cover art for an album titled *Golem*, by a band called Mass Dismemberment; death metal music blaring from the speakers, emphasis on a heavy chorus comprised of demonic chanting; the bathroom—me stumbling over the toilet bowl filled to the brim with Ty's horse-caliber leavings and, next, my prolific upchuck while *Golem* plays over the PA—

—back to the present.

I fidget as I look at Scatman. "Is it possible for one of these, er, golem creatures to be made on accident?"

"Well, you'd have to have a pretty unique set of circumstances." Scatman thinks for a moment. "I'm talking the kind of random coincidence it would take to get *Futurama* back on the air again. But I guess it's technically possible."

"And, just out of curiosity, let's say you have that random coincidence, and all you need is the, uh, incantation...would playing death metal music containing demonic chanting work?"

"If the chanting happens to be an activation spell, sure."

Huh.

"What?" Brie asks, eyeing me suspiciously.

"Last night, in the clubhouse bathroom...I kind of puked on someone's dump while a death metal band chanted in the background over the PA."

The awkwardest of silences settles over the room.

First to regain use of his words, Noah says slowly, "Okay...that's totally gross and disgusting and not something you want to be proud of."

"I'm not—it wasn't—I'm just saying, when did things start getting weird around our apartment complex? The morning after the party. And where did it happen first? The clubhouse bathroom."

Noah frowns, considering this.

(Scatman pretends to be concentrating on the stool sample—even though he's really sneaking glimpses at Brie and Susan's various parts.)

"Wait," Ty says, catching an accusing stare from Susan. "Hold on a minute. Now, I know there's some kind of funky toilet monster crawling around our pipes. As totally and completely impossible as it should be, I'm with you on that. But don't go all jumping to conclusions on me. It was Salsa Saturday. There were all kinds of people dropping anchor. How do you know little brother here puked on *mine*?"

"Because the first thing you did when you came out of the bathroom was show me a picture you'd taken with your cell phone. I believe your exact words were, 'Babe, check out what I just made.'"

Ty blushes. "That doesn't prove anything. Someone else might have gone in after me."

"Oh, trust me, no one used that toilet after you. No one except for poor Kayleb here. And look where it got us."

Everyone fidgets, unsure of what to say.

"It doesn't matter whose crap it was that spawned the golem," Ty says after a moment. "What matters is how we get rid of the thing."

"Actually, it does matter," Scatman says. "Only a golem's creator can activate or deactivate it."

"Aw, don't tell me that."

Brie looks at Scatman. "Wait. You said a golem does its master's bidding, right?"

"That's correct, my lovely."

"If that's true, and if it really was Ty's, er, waste that created the golem, well, it doesn't make sense that this thing is doing his bidding. He loves everybody."

Susan nods in agreement. "It's true. You know those college kids who go door to door trying to sell you magazines to help pay for their tuition? He invites them inside, makes them lunch, and ends up subscribing to, like, ten different magazines he'll never read. He's African Flanders."

"African Flanders."

Now everyone looks at me.

"Hey, *I'm* not out to get anyone," I say, probably a little too defensively. "And even if I were, I wouldn't use a *fecal golem* to do it."

Scatman holds up his hand; it glistens with poo. "If I may interject here, I just want to point out that unless either of you is into black magic and can read Hebrew, the golem is almost certainly *not* doing either of your bidding."

"What, then?" asks Noah. "The thing's on autopilot?"

"Oh, it's taking orders from someone, and that someone has at least a working knowledge of the occult. People vomit all the time while simultaneously taking a dump and listening to good old-fashioned death metal, and they don't end up with a golem problem. Accident or no accident as far as the raw materials are concerned, there's intent here. We just have to figure out whose. Let's try something." He closes his eyes and resumes his poop play. After a moment, he moves his bowl toward me. "Give me a little spit."

Recoiling slightly, I reply, "Seriously?"

"Sure."

"Why?"

"I've got an inkling of something, but I want to be certain."

Brie turns away, grossed out.

Noah smiles and nods at the bowl.

Sighing, I lean forward, holding my nose, working up a gob of spit. Against my better judgment, I glance into the bowl and spot Scatman's hands covered in excrement—

—I spit quickly and without linger.

Scatman moves the bowl toward Noah. "A contribution, if you please."

Noah's grin becomes a grimace, though he spits amicably.

Brie's next.

Lastly, Scatman beckons to Susan. “Don’t be shy, precious.”

Susan scoots off of Ty’s lap, walks over to the table. While we watch, enraptured, she leans over the bowl, holding back her hair with her hands, and spits. Unfortunately, she ends up with a rope of saliva dangling from her lips. She wrestles with it a moment, wagging her head back and forth, smacking her lips together, and, finally, spitting again, then wiping her mouth and returning to her seat.

Scatman slides the bowl back toward himself and starts palpitating the leavings with renewed fervor. “Oh, now that’s interesting.”

“What’s interesting?” I ask.

“The lovely ladies will be happy to know they’re in the clear. But you two...” He palpitates some more. “Let me just sort this out here. I’m getting some impressions. Power bars. Protein shakes. Barbells and lat machines. Paintings.” He pauses, opening one eye and looking at Ty. “Huh. You don’t look like a painter.”

“How’d you know I’m a painter?” Ty asks.

“It’s all in the leavings.” Scatman chuckles, concentrates some more, now facing me. “Computer programming manuals, gluten-free ginger snaps...a playlist with Lady Gaga’s *The Fame* on it.”

Noah faces me as well. “Lady Gaga? Really?”

“Dude,” I say, blushing. “‘Poker Face.’”

Scatman frowns at Noah. “You ever play with an ouija board?”

“No,” Noah replies.

To me: “Ever handle any cursed fetishes? Necklaces? Shrunken heads? Rabbit’s feet?”

“Of course not.”

“Know any practicing witches who might have it out for you?”

Noah clears his throat. “Okay, enough with the Twenty Questions. What are you getting at?”

“You, my friend, are cursed.” Scatman nods at me, too. “Both of you, in fact.”

Noah waves his hand in the air. “Wait, hold on. When you say ‘cursed,’ do you mean, like, broken mirrors? Seven years of bad luck? Saying ‘Macbeth’ inside a theater?”

“Yep. And I’ll bet chimichangas to chili cheese fries that’s how your little golem friend was activated. An indirect enchantment passed along through Kayleb’s vomit.”

“Get out of here. That’s just silly. That’s just—”

“About as crazy as a three-foot-tall golem climbing out of Duane’s toilet and then attacking him?” Brie suggests.

Noah gets up from his chair. “It’s been an enema of a day. I can stomach one supernatural event before bedtime, but golems *and* curses?” He scowls at Scatman. “Look, buddy, no offense, but you’re literally full of it. The golem I get. You can see it with your own two eyes, like a chupacabra, or a mutant circus baby or whatever. Curses, though, that’s just—you’re telling my brother what he wants to hear so that he doesn’t feel like a total dweeb for dropping forty bucks on

something he probably could've Googled on his own."

Without cleaning them first, Scatman lifts his hands out of his divination bowl (or whatever you'd call it in this particular scenario), picks up one of the mini-pizzas, and offers it to me. "Here," he says.

"Thanks, but I'm, uh, not hungry," I reply.

Scatman stands, moves away from the table. He holds the pizza out in front of him; he drops it onto the floor. It lands with the cheese side up. "See that? Cheese side up, right?"

"Um...yeah."

"Now, you try."

"Try what, exactly?"

"The pizza!" Scatman jabs his finger insistently at the plate of mini-pizzas. "Take one and drop it onto the floor. If you can get it to land cheese side up, I'll refund your forty bucks here and now."

"Listen to the man," Noah urges.

Full refund? I'm game. I shrug and get up, grab a pizza, hold it perfectly level in the air, cheese up, crust down. I drop it onto the floor.

The pizza lands cheese side down.

"See?" Scatman nods knowingly.

I frown, picking up the pizza and wondering if I'm going to have to help clean up after. "Best two out of three."

"By all means, friend."

I try again, and again the pizza somehow manages to flip in mid-air so that it lands cheese side down.

Scatman chuckles.

For my third try, I squat and hold the pizza a foot above the ground, facing up. I let go, and the pizza does an impossible somersault and lands cheese-down again. "Holy crap."

Noah steps in, concerned. "Are you tilting it or something?"

"I'm not tilting anything." I look up at the others. "I'm cursed."

"Dude, pizza *always* lands face-down. It's the peanut butter and jelly phenomenon. Doesn't mean you're cursed."

Scatman fishes a quarter from out of his pocket. "Call it."

"Heads," Noah answers, folding his arms and narrowing his eyes.

Scatman flips the quarter.

Tails.

"Again," he tells Noah.

"Tails."

Heads.

"Again."

"Tails."

Heads.

"Again."

"Heads."

Tails.

Whoa.

Scatman looks pleased. "We could go on all night, and the coin wouldn't land in your favor. You're cursed, my friend. And how. In fact, I don't think I've ever met anyone as tainted as you and your brother."

That would explain *so* much! "Dude—our *thing*. I told you."

"What *thing*?" Noah snaps, playing dumb.

"The one, long continuous year of bad luck resulting in our girlfriends dumping us, losing our jobs, our parents kicking us out, our pipes being clogged with a poop monster—*that* thing!"

"Hey, we may have had our share of hard knocks recently—" Noah takes a step back. "—but so does everyone. It doesn't mean we're *cursed*—" He moves backward a little more—and steps on one of Scatman's mini-pizzas. He slips and falls, landing flat on his back, groaning, the air knocked out of him.

"Bro, you okay?" asks Ty, rushing to his side.

"Yeah," Noah rasps.

While he helps Noah to his feet, Brie turns to Scatman and says, "Okay, so these two goofballs are cursed. How do we *break* the curse?"

Scatman shrugs. "Ordinarily, I'd say a prayer and a sea salt bath would do the trick, but a jinx with enough juice to indirectly evoke a golem from your friend's crap, that's going to require some serious overtime from a practiced sorcerer or witch. It might just be easier to track down whoever placed the curse in the first place and ask them nicely if they'll reverse it."

"Will that fix our golem problem?" asks Ty.

"Ah, for *that* you'll have to get your hands dirty, I'm afraid." Scatman walks into the adjoining bathroom. Much to my relief, he's *not* looking for a bigger bowl, but instead starts washing his hands. Through the open door: "But good news, Ty-boy. Since you made the little tyke, even if by way of a chance meeting between your bulk matter and Kayleb's curse, you're its creator. That means you're also its master. A golem will typically be activated with the word 'truth' inscribed in Hebrew across its forehead. Traditionally, you'd remove the aleph—the *x* at the end—changing 'truth' to 'death,' and thereby deactivating the golem."

"That's it?" I ask, expecting something involving magic spells and/or the playing of seventies-era Mike Oldfield.

Finished with his hands, Scatman starts flossing his teeth. "Yep. Piece of cake, my friends."

Chapter 16

Kayleb

I glance through the passenger window as Ty pulls his truck into the Lovéren parking lot. There's an uncertain quietness hanging over the rec area. It's so quiet that I can hear Duane's muffled vomiting through the shuttered office window.

"That doesn't sound good," I murmur, getting out along with Noah and Ty.

The girls remain in their seats.

"You aren't coming?" Noah asks.

Susan and Brie exchange glances.

"If it's all the same," Susan replies, "we're going to hang back."

Brie holds up her cell phone and smiles sheepishly. "Call us if you need anything."

She and Susan lock the truck's doors and watch with worried faces, their hands pressed against the glass.

The sound of horrendous vomiting once again reverberates across the rec area.

Turning and facing in the direction of Duane's office, Noah says, "We should check on him."

"What the hell for?" Ty asks, very un-Flanders.

"He's our neighbor and landlord...or something like that. And his office was the last place we saw Dookie."

I raise an eyebrow. "*Dookie*?"

"I name crap I don't trust." Noah glances nervously at me. "Are we going to do this?"

In answer, I open the rec area gate and start toward Duane's office—mind you not because my balls are in any way overtly large or made of steel, but because Brie's watching me, and it would appear I do stupid things when cute Asian girls are watching me.

Not to be upstaged, Noah and Ty follow.

When we arrive at the office, Noah takes the initiative (I'm more than happy to let him have it) and knocks on the door. "Duane? Yo, buddy. You in there?"

Duane doesn't answer.

Noah grasps the knob, twists, pushes the door open, enters cautiously, me and Ty trailing slightly behind as we survey the carnage in awed silence. The room is

dim, the only light coming from Duane's desk lamp. The floors are speckled with do and puke, and various pieces of furniture have been overturned. Duane sits slumped at his desk, his chair swiveled so that the back is facing us.

I don't even wait for Noah to pull his usual rock-paper-scissors routine—I push him forward immediately.

Ty helps.

Flicking us off, Noah stumbles toward the desk. "Uh, I hope this isn't a bad time, but...I...we just wanted to, uh, apologize for ducking out so quickly earlier. That was a cheap move and, well, we're back to see how you're doing. We were just, er, caught a little by surprise, that's all. No hard feelings, right?" He reaches Duane's chair, puts his hand on the back— "Yo, bossman..." —swivels the chair around, revealing Duane in the lamplight—

—holy hell.

The Duane Bourbon we left for dead has been replaced with some kind of grotesque horror movie caricature. He's emaciated, shriveled up, dehydrated like a piece of fruit left out in the sun. Half-dried vomit and feces cakes his chin.

"Jesus," Noah gasps, and recoils, covering his mouth with his hand.

Beside me, Ty lets loose a whimper.

Duane blinks at us, his eyes bloodshot and red-rimmed. "I've been...vomiting non-stop for...over an hour. I...I don't have anymore..."

Noah swallows hard. "It's, er, probably just...indigestion. I'm sure if you drink some fluids, get a little rest you'll be right as acid rain in the morning—"

Grabbing feebly at Noah's shirt collar, Duane pulls him closer. "Getting old is a terrible thing. It sneaks up on you. You try to...keep two steps ahead, but you can't run forever. You trip once and that's when old age pounces. One day you're young, beautiful...firm..." He squeezes Noah's butt.

Noah flinches and tries to politely pull away.

Duane tightens his grasp on his shirt collar. "...the next you're puking your guts out on some...poor college girl's immaculate crotch while thinking to yourself, 'Jesus H. Christ...I'm old enough to be her father.'"

"That's crazy talk," Noah squeaks. "You don't look a day over thirty—"

"Promise me you won't get old, Noah. Promise me...promise me you'll immortalize this—" Duane gives Noah's butt another squeeze. "—while it's good and ripe. It doesn't have to be anything special. A webcam video, some nude selfies in front of the bathroom mirror...a few dozen choice shots posted online for all time. You promise me, boy."

"Um, okay. Sure. I promise I'll do...that."

Duane lets him go, sags back in his chair (as one does upon securing a pledge of online nudity).

Noah backs off several steps, wipes the residue of dirty old man from his backside.

"What was that all about?" I ask.

"Like I have the slightest idea," Noah replies.

Duane goes completely delirious: "'Why does a man have to die? The world

goes on for millions of years, and how long is a man's life?'"

Is he quoting Walter Bedecker from *The Twilight Zone*?

"'A drop, a microscopic fragment—'" He vomits again. By now he doesn't have the strength left to bend forward, so he simply leans back and convulses, lets forth a vile trickle that dribbles down his chin. His eyes roll back in his head. I'd say he's looking bad, but that wouldn't even begin to cover it.

"Dude, random hypothesis," I say. "I think Duane ate the poop monster."

Noah does a double-take, looks even more grossed-out than before. "You think so?"

Well, I was mostly joking, but Duane *does* look a lot like someone who's just devoured a poop monster. "Um...yeah?"

"All right. Another minute of this and I'm done for the night." Noah nudges Ty. "It's golem-ganking time."

Ty nods in agreement, but otherwise remains unmoved.

"Well?"

"Well what?"

"Summon the golem."

"'Summon the golem?' Do I look like friggin' Gandalf to you?"

"No. Gandalf had bigger balls."

"Cracker, one more jab like that and I'll summon my fist into your face."

Before Noah can blurt a comeback, I quickly clamp my hand over his mouth and say to Ty, "Okay, Scatman said you're the golem's master. You control it. Just... call him out and we'll, er, provide backup."

"Like a motherflipping dog, huh?" Ty scowls. "'Fetch me my slippers, Fido?'" He crosses the office, heading into the bathroom.

"Dude! Where are you going?" I want to tell him to be careful, but chances are the more I say, the higher the odds are I'll accidentally dissuade him from following through. So, I stay put, my attention split between the bathroom doorway and the ongoing spectacle of Duane's impossibly continuous wretching.

Ty reemerges a moment later with each of his hands wrapped generously in toilet paper. Giant arms bulging, massive pecs heaving, six-pack beer gut rippling, he walks into the center of the room and pounds his fists together. "All right, turd! Come on out! Time to meet your maker! Where you at?"

Duane abruptly quiets, and he straightens mechanically, spreads his arms. A change comes over his expression; he smiles crookedly at Ty. In a markedly crappy voice he says, "I'm right here, big boy."

Ty faces him.

Duane smiles. "Don't look so surprised. It's not like you didn't think he was full of it anyway."

"No...way..." Ty looks at me and Noah. "The golem's *inside* this cracker!"

Noah nods. "You called it, Kay-Kay."

Duane gets to his feet, his motions unnatural, his posture broken. He examines one of his arms. "I thought it was time for a new suit. Word has it on the Interwebs that you're looking to bag a golem?"

"How the hell did the golem know we were coming to kill it?" Noah whispers into my ear.

"More importantly," I whisper back, "how do we erase the aleph if that thing's *inside* Duane?"

Noah looks thoughtful. "A catheter?"

"Look, dog," Ty continues, ignoring our sidebar. "We don't want any trouble. You come on out of there and let's do business face-to-face. I command you as your, uh, maker."

Dookie-Duane smiles, taps his cheek with his hand. "You'll have to beat the crap out of Duane for that one, Toblerone. One good blow to the face ought to do it."

Ty says, "Duane, if you're in there, I apologize in advance for the beating you're about to receive—" He swings at Dookie-Duane.

Dookie-Duane's arm reacts with lightning-quick speed, catching Ty's fist, squeezing. He grins. "See, this is the problem with bodybuilders. No finesse. All that mass, and you can't even take down a lanky, middle-aged homeslice such as myself."

Ty tries to punch him with his other fist.

Again Dookie-Duane catches it, holding him with super-human strength. He gloats, shoves Ty back.

The two of them circle each other.

"Uh, guys?" Ty says. "This poop-whisperer stuff isn't working too well."

Noah and I have scurried behind Duane's desk, and are crouching with only the top halves of our heads exposed.

"Be direct!" Noah shouts with absolutely zero conviction. "Assert your dominance!"

"Yeah, Ty!" Dookie-Duane taunts. "Show me who's boss!" He charges forward, jerkily fakes left, right, and, with a single enormous blow, slams into Ty. The two of them go crashing through the window and out into the rec area.

Noah and I rush to the window, watch as Ty and Dookie-Duane roll around on the ground, really going at it now, Ty throwing mad fists, Duane somehow coordinating his disjointed flails with uncanny effectiveness.

"Dude, what the hell?" Noah says, pretty much putting into words exactly what I'm thinking. "Scatman said all we had to do was erase the magic letter from the golem's forehead. He didn't mention any close encounters of the turd kind."

Ty lands an uppercut against Dookie-Duane's jaw, causing his whole head to rattle with the force of the punch. Dook spurts from his mouth, his nose.

"We need to get him out of Duane," I say.

"Not that I doubt your logic or anything," Noah assures, "but how, brainiac? Asking nicely didn't work, and from what I can tell, Greco-Roman style wrestling isn't getting the job done, either..." He trails off, looking thoughtful—and snaps his fingers. "I've got an idea."

"What?"

He darts into the bathroom without answering.

Please tell me he's not just taking a sec to rub one out.

I peer through the broken window again. Ty continues to wrestle awkwardly with Dookie-Duane. In the background, a few lights have been turned on, one or two "shut the hell up!'s" have been uttered, but by and large none of Lovéren's tenants seem to care that their property manager has been possessed by a foul-mouthed turd borne of an off-season bodybuilder's bowel movement.

"You're supposed to do what I say, turd!" Ty bellows. "I created you—I'm your master!"

"You just keep telling yourself that," Dookie-Duane chuckles.

Noah returns to my side. He's got a bottle of laxative in hand.

"*That's* your brilliant idea?" I shout, incredulous.

"Hey, I said I had an idea," Noah replies. "I never said it was brilliant. Give me a hand."

I hesitate, watching Ty and Dookie-Duane fight a moment longer and trying to work out in my head the logistics of administering laxative to a grown man in the midst of a throw-down. But whatever—if MacGyver could improvise, so can we. I nod at Noah and follow him through the window frame, admittedly careful to make sure he keeps the lead (why we don't use the door is beyond me). We rush over to where Dookie-Duane has positioned himself on top of Ty and is now trying to strangle him.

"Wait for the signal," Noah instructs, handing me the laxative bottle. Then, grabbing Dookie-Duane by the shoulders, he works to pry him off of Ty. His first attempt isn't very effective; Duane is clearly covered in feces and vomit, and Noah clearly doesn't want to get any of it on himself. But after taking a few elbows in the stomach, ribs, and face, annoyance (a busted lip, too) spurs him to step up his game. He grabs Dookie-Duane under the armpits and, with Ty's help, manages to flip him over, pin him onto the ground. This is when he yells, not unlike Richard Dreyfuss when he kicked Bill Murray out of the car in *What About Bob?*, the unintelligible command, "*Gividahim!*"

My heart skips a beat. "Is that the signal?"

"*Thasafugginsignal!*"

Show time. I duck in, rip the cap off the laxative bottle, and start force-feeding it to Dookie-Duane. "How much should I—?"

"*Wholefugginthing!*"

I manage to get maybe a third of the bottle down before Dookie-Duane starts coughing and sputtering and generally looking like he's about to crap his pants.

Which he does.

While simultaneously blasting dookie from out of every orifice in his body.

Projectile poo douses Noah, Ty, and myself; turds fly through the air in every direction, landing in the grass, the bushes, on nearby lounge chairs. Finally, Duane, little more than a shriveled rag doll at this point, goes limp beneath us.

Stunned. Effing. Silence.

I glance quickly around the rec area, again amazed that we haven't drawn a crowd. Well, that's not entirely true. There *is* that random college chick in the jean

jacket who's standing slack-jawed over by the parking lot entrance and aiming her phone's camera squarely at us, watching and waiting...and possibly going over keywords in her head for when she posts this on YouTube later.

"Ow, ow, *ow!*" Ty sits up, revealing that a constipation-class turd has become embedded firmly in one of his eye sockets. (I'm not sure if it's a superficial wound, or if his eye is lying somewhere in the grass, but it's grody either way.) "It hurts! It *hurts!*" He starts bawling like a child.

I drop the bottle of laxative. "Wow. Uh...that didn't go like I'd planned."

"No duh." Noah wipes a hearty chunk of dook from his face and gets to his feet, starts helping Ty up.

Laying Duane out on the concrete, I try feeling for a pulse. I think he's got one —though let's be honest, if the best you can do is *think* someone has a pulse, they're probably not doing too well.

"Dude, bail," Noah says, eyeing the jeans jacket chick.

"But what about—"

"He'll be fine."

"He doesn't seem fine." I glance again at Duane, who looks deader than dead.

Noah lets go of Ty, crouches over Duane, grabs him under the arms. "Help me move him over here." We drag him to the nearest lounger, propping him up, adjusting his filth-encrusted bathrobe, trying desperately to affect the appearance of a guy out for a late-night breath of fresh air. The result is a human-shaped piece of beef jerky wheezing miserably, his head slouching into his shoulder every time we let go of it.

"Dude," I say, "this isn't *Weekend at Bernie's*. We can't leave him like this."

Noah waves his hand back and forth in front of Duane's lifeless face, gets a papery burp in response. "See? Bernie was dead. Dwade here's just...resting his skin."

"We should call 911."

"Might I remind you, this is the cretin who was going to blackmail us into shooting porn for him."

True that.

"He would've dishonored our dongs and exploited our cornholes. Now, let's *bail*, Kay-Kay."

I linger a moment longer before getting to my feet and helping Noah guide Ty out of the rec area. We pass the jeans jacket chick; wordlessly, she swivels on the spot, keeping her phone aimed at us—like a female version of that creepy dude with the camcorder and plastic bag in *American Beauty*.

"Montezuma's Revenge," Noah explains erroneously.

She doesn't say a word.

I just keep my head down, pretending to be unaware—when I *should* be paying attention to small-but-important details back inside the rec area. Namely the fact that the turds which had exploded out of Duane are now wriggling through the grass like snakes, seeking each other out.

Coalescing.

Combining.

* * *

Ty wails all the way back to the truck.

On seeing him, Susan immediately ejects herself from the passenger seat and rushes to his side. "Oh, my God! What happened?"

"Baby girl," Ty moans, "get me to the ER."

Brie hops out of the truck, too. "Did you do it? Did you deactivate the golem? Is it safe to go back home?"

I look uncertainly at Noah and Ty, then back at Brie. "I...don't know."

"What does that mean?" Susan asks. "Either you did or you didn't."

Ty shakes his head. "What he means is, we're boned."

"Precision of language, sweetie."

"Half the freakin' complex saw the token African gent and his friends jump and then kill their landlord with a bottle of laxative."

"*What?*"

"Well, technically," Noah says, "Kayleb was the one who forced the actual laxative—"

"You killed Duane?" Brie exclaims, looking horrified.

"Nobody killed anyone," Ty replies. "I mean...I don't think we did. I mean—" He shakes his head; the turd in his eye socket wags grotesquely. "Brie, look. I'm sure you and the boys here are good people, so don't take this the wrong way, but... y'all best handle your own affairs from now on."

Noah blinks. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying this is where me and my lady get off. This is where we say goodbye. Y'all are on your own."

"You're joking."

"You heard the poop doctor. Y'all are cursed. You can't toss a coin. Little brother's bringing other people's crap to life. I don't want any part of this."

"It's not like you can catch it from a toilet seat," I point out.

"*You guys* caught it from somewhere!"

"Well, I'm just stunned," Noah says. "What happened to African Flanders?"

I nod. "Yeah. African Flanders."

"African Flanders," Ty replies, "isn't going near this dive ever again! At least, not until the whole toilet monster thing blows over. And even then, it'll only be to chuck my stuff into a moving van." He turns around, starts fumbling for the passenger door handle. "Now, somebody *please* get me to the friggin' emergency room!"

Susan helps him in.

"That's messed up, Ty!" Noah shouts. "I thought we were friends!"

"Sorry, Photoshop. I'm demoting you to neighbor."

Susan closes the passenger door, then goes around to the driver's side, gets in, starts the engine, and drives off.

Brie looks at Noah, at me, back at Noah. "Just to be clear...you *didn't* take care of the golem after all?"

Noah's awkward answer: "We...it sort of...out of Duane's...um, we'll get back to you on that."

Brie looks at me. "Kayleb?"

"Okay, first of all," I say, "I want to make it abundantly clear that Duane was wonked out *before* we got to him. *Before.* Second..." I bite my lip. "I hate to say it, but Ty's right. It won't matter to the cops what we were *really* doing with Duane. What'll matter is what it *looked* like we were doing. We need to split. Right now. And you...you should probably just go home and forget you ever met the likes of us."

"Oh, yeah. *That'll* be easy after tonight."

I spread my arms. "We're cursed, Brie. I mean, look around you. Everything we touch turns to crap. Literally. You need to call a friend or your parents or something, spend the night as far from us as possible." I turn and walk away—not really wanting to, but needing to impress upon her the graveness of the situation by doing so.

"Okay, then," Brie murmurs, sounding disappointed. "See you around."

"Don't mind him," Noah tells her. "The more awkwardly bashful he gets around a girl, the more he likes her. But trust me, he's all man when it comes to sext."

"Thanks for that, Noah."

"You're welcome."

"I was being sarcastic."

Chapter 17

Noah

Back at our apartment, I follow Kay-Kay's example and, between a quick rinse-off and change of clothes, grab my duffel bag, start cramming various toiletries and items of clothing into it. "We're going to have to go deep on this one," I say. "I'm talking a loft at the back of a massage parlor. A cardboard box under an overpass. A burned-out Honda in the middle of the desert."

Kay-Kay finishes packing first, zips up his bag, slings his backpack over his shoulder, and sighs heavily, leaning against the bedroom door frame. "This sucks."

"The show must go on. There'll be other girls, Kay-Kay."

"It's not that. Well, it's mostly that. But it's also the fact that no matter how many times we move, we're never going to outrun this thing."

"Just because we didn't kill the little bastard exactly like Scatman told us to doesn't mean we didn't kill it."

"I'm not talking about the golem."

"Then what's the problem?"

Kay-Kay lingers a moment, lost for words. He's got that serious look on his face—like he wants to get all Charlie Rose with me, but won't because he assumes I'll never give him the chance. Or, worse, that I'll half-listen to what he has to say, and then disregard him completely before he's finished. So, he does what he always does whenever we're on the cusp of a brother-to-brother: he waits just long enough for me to not say something, and then quickly changes the subject—thereby making it look like I was never going to add to the conversation in the first place when really *he's* the one being the douchebag.

Two can play at that game. "How do hikers pack their junk without using, like, ten bags?"

Kay-Kay scowls and starts out of the room. "I'm going to wait by the car."

Damn it! He did it to me again!

Kayleb

Making my way inconspicuously into the parking lot, I drop my bags and lean against Noah's Corolla, keeping my head down just in case anyone's on the lookout for the deviants who laxatived the hell out of Lovéren's property manager. It's eerily quiet. I wonder if that camera chick has called an ambulance or the police yet—or is she still standing there with her phone aimed at Duane's dehydrated carcass, waiting for social media gold? I'm sure Duane will be fine...right? *We* didn't do anything to him. I mean, he was already done for by the time we got back from Scatman's. At the very least, we didn't make him *worse*. By much.

Right?

I'm seriously considering calling 911—but there's a battle going on inside my head that's got me stuck between doing the right thing for a fellow citizen in need, and doing whatever it takes to distance myself from any possible connection to what happened here tonight. Out of nervous habit, I take out my phone and start swiping through my photos. Clearing away old, obsolete pics—shots of myself and Bridget during better times, mostly—gives me at least a semblance of normalcy during times of crisis. I've been meaning to remove her presence from my phone completely ever since we broke up, but I keep chickening out. Oh, I hit the delete button for each and every pic of us I view. However, whenever the confirmation dialog pops up, I invariably tap "cancel," and end up restoring them all, a mental oscillation of, "I don't need these photos anymore. They do nothing for me." To, "Well, if they're so insignificant, what's the harm in keeping them around? You've got a beefy SD card installed." It's the same logic game that porn addicts play whenever they think they've worked up enough willpower to finally delete all the folders on their various hard drives with "schlong," "poontang," or "booty" in the name.

A text notification pops up.

It's from Dom:

> WINNING ISN'T EVERYTHING, IT'S THE ONLY THING! LET'S DO THIS! MONDAY MORNING, BRIGHT AND EARLY—I'M COUNTING ON YOU BOYS! GO! GO!!!

Ugh. People who use all-caps shouldn't be allowed to own a smartphone.

Dismissing Dom's text, I continue almost-deleting Bridget pics. On hearing the sound of someone approaching, I assume it's Noah, and say, without looking up, "Just so you know, you're paying for the hotel. I already shelled out for Scatman, and I'm not..." I trail off, glancing up to find Brie standing beside me. She's hefting a backpack and gym bag, and has added her glasses and a pink hoodie to her usual attire. I quickly put my phone to sleep, stuff it into my pocket. "Oh, hey. Are you, uh, heading out?"

"Not exactly," Brie replies. "Would you be terribly inconvenienced if I rode with you tonight?"

"Yeah, sure. I mean, no, it wouldn't be an inconvenience at all. I mean—" Use your words, for God's sake! "—are you sure?"

Brie grimaces. “I have an unhealthy affinity for curse-bearing computer geeks. That, and my parents live eight hours away, and none of my friends are answering their phones right now.”

I grimace back. “You realize this makes you a shareholder of Losers, Incorporated.”

“Better that than sitting around here waiting for that...*thing* to climb out of my toilet bowl.”

Noah comes running up to the car. Unlike me and Brie, who were at least smart enough to pack light, he struggles with a backpack, several bags, and an unwieldily armful of clothes. “Quick—grab the car keys from my hip pocket and pop the trunk.”

“Nice try,” Brie says, “but I’m not going to stick my hand down your pants.”

Noah cranes his neck so that he can see over the top of his clothing pile. “Oh. Hey, Brie Cheese. I didn’t see you standing there.”

“Light traveler, are we?”

“Bite me.”

We load up the car, then Brie and I clamber into the back seat while Noah takes the wheel.

“Are you sure we shouldn’t just *check* on Duane—”

“It’s an apartment complex,” Noah says. “Someone will find him.”

“But—”

“Blackmail, giant douche, and so forth.” He revs the engine.

The hell out of Dodge we get.

No one says anything for the first several minutes on the road. We’re all still in fight-or-flight mode and assuming Noah knows where he’s going. But I guess that’s a good thing. If we talk, it’s going to be about the golem, and talking about the golem only serves to make it more real in our minds—and right now, I don’t think any of us wants the golem to be real.

Eventually, Brie nudges me. “Hey.”

I offer a weak smile. “Hey.”

“So, just to be nosey, how ex is your ex?”

“Huh?”

“That Bridget girl. I saw you looking at her picture back in the parking lot.”

“Oh.” Thank God for the cover of shadow, because suddenly I’m blushing like the Dutch Boy kid. “You know how it is with old photos. I’ve been meaning to clear out my phone.”

“Do you still keep in touch?”

“Not really. And by that I mean not at all—which is probably a good thing.”

“Why’s that?”

I shrug. “I was DC Comics, she was Marvel.”

“Wow. That is *such* a geek answer.”

“I am what I am. How about you?”

“How about me what?”

“I showed you mine. It’s only fair that you show me yours.”

Brie smirks. “Not that I’m proud of it or anything, but I’m a card-carrying bachelorette at the moment.”

I give her a questioning look.

“Traditional Chinese-Vietnamese parents. The deal is, I lay off the boys until I get myself a degree or two, and my parents pay for everything. It’s a creepy, ‘we’re going to preserve our darling little girl’s virtue in a jar till she’s forty’ kind of birth control. Salsa Saturday was my big act of rebellion.” She chuckles. “It’s funny how things work out. My first Saturday night away from the books, and who do I meet?”

I wait.

“*You*, dummy.”

“Oh. Right.”

Up front, Noah rolls his eyes, mutters under his breath, “Mothers, lock up your daughters.”

Chapter 18

Noah

I pull up in front of the darkened two-story house and kill the engine, glance over my shoulder at Kay-Kay and Brie Cheese. They've fallen asleep leaning on each other, heads touching. Brie's glasses hang crooked on the bridge of her nose.

Oh, to be young and in love—and also good at math.

I bang on the back of the seat. "Wakie, wakie, my sweets."

The two of them stir, groggily at first, and then clearing their throats and quickly detaching themselves from one another when they realize they'd been unintentionally team-sleeping.

"Where are we?" Kay-Kay peers through the window—does a double-take. "Is that...is that Madam Nightshade's house?"

I unbuckle my seatbelt and start to get out of the car. "The one and only."

"And we're here because...?"

"Just felt like getting a little late-night palm reading."

"I thought you didn't believe in that kind of stuff."

"I believe that you believe," is the best answer I can come up with on a moment's notice. I wouldn't exactly say it's true. But it's also not *not* true. Slamming the driver's side door shut, I start up Nightshade's front walk.

"What does that even mean?" Brie Cheese whispers loudly as she and the brah follow me. "Who's Madam Nightshade?"

I ascend the front step, ring the doorbell, knock insistently while Kay-Kay and the Cheese take turns paying nervous glances over their shoulders.

"Dude," Kay-Kay says. "What are we doing here?"

"Yeah," adds Brie. "And *who's Madam Nightshade?*"

"I think it's safe to say," I reply, "we bungled the whole golem letter-erasing thing. But I'm not going to bed until I've had at least one win tonight."

"Which would be...?"

"This is all about cursed toilet brownies, right? Now, I'm still on the fence regarding the whole thing, but if curses *do* exist, this bitch knows about them. And if she really did drop one on us, then she can *un*-drop on us."

"Assuming she doesn't just call the police," Kay-Kay points out.

For the third time Brie asks, "Guys—*who's Madam Nightshade?*"

"Scatman asked us if we knew anyone who had it out for us. A year ago, Noah and I went on a double date. Bridget wanted to see a mystic just for chuckles, and Mr. Manners here couldn't go for more than five minutes without being a jerk."

"I wasn't a *jerk*," I insist. "I was...outspoken. As a professional scam artist, I'm sure she's used to some creative criticism."

"You called her 'Madam Nightshady' to her face."

Oh, yeah—I did, didn't I? "Dude, if curses are real—*if* they're real—and if it turns out this Madam Evening Shade, or whatever the hell she likes to go by, has actually *cursed* you and me for getting on her mossy side, then I totally don't feel bad for resorting to childish name-calling." I resume banging on the door, ringing the bell.

After a moment, Madam Nightshady herself answers. In her late-forties, tall, slender, goose-necked, she's wearing a sloppily-tied bathrobe and slippers, and has a cucumber pack smeared over her face.

"I swear to God, Chad," she groans, "if your idea of apologizing for last weekend is showing up on my doorstep at the crack of midnight, you are *gravely* mistaken..." She trails off, blinking at me, at the others. "Who the hell are you?"

"*A-ha!*" I exclaim, snapping my finger. "There, *right there* is proof positive you're full of it!"

"Excuse me?"

"If you're so *psychic*, tell me how many fingers I'm holding up." I start to flick her off—

—Kay-Kay intervenes, clamping his hand over my mouth and shoving my arm out of the way. "My brother and I came to see you last year for a reading, and it, um, didn't go too well."

"Look, son," Nightshady says, sighing as if she's heard this story a thousand times over. "I make it clear before every reading that there are no refunds. Now, kindly get off my property before I call the cops."

"We don't want any trouble—"

"Trouble's what you're going to get if you don't *beat it*—"

Through Kay-Kay's hand, I shout, "We want our lives back, witch!"

He tightens his grip. "We came to see you last year, and my brother here said a few, er, unsavory things about you and your practice, at which point you proceeded to, um, curse us."

Recollection hitting her, Nightshady narrows her eyes angrily at me. "*You*—now I remember! Never in all my life!" She moves to close the door.

I wrestle out of Kay-Kay's grip and ingeniously wedge my foot in the threshold. "Not so fast—"

Nightshady grips the doorknob and starts slamming the door on my foot repeatedly.

—and that's the straw that breaks this camel's back. With a pained battle cry, I force the door open and dart in after the now hastily retreating madam.

Kay-Kay calls after me: "You realize this is pretty much breaking and entering, right?"

I'm not listening. I'm in 100% knock-a-bitch-down mode. I've got no clue what's going to happen once I get to her—I just know I'm not leaving until I do.

Nightshady rushes into the kitchen, yanking open drawers and cabinets in search of a makeshift weapon. She ends up with an egg whisk, turns around, spots her cell phone on the table at about the same time I do.

I look at Nightshady.

She looks at me, at the cell phone—

—the two of us go diving for it simultaneously. Technically, I reach it first, but I bungle the grab, sending the phone careening over the edge of the tabletop. It clatters onto the floor.

Nightshady lunges at me with the egg whisk.

"Hey!" I dodge out of the way.

Nightshady lunges at me again.

Again, I dodge. "I'm not above hitting a lady!"

Nightshady's way ahead of me, and kicks me in the face with an impossibly flexible leg.

I stumble backward, the breath knocked out of me.

"Pilates—every Monday, Wednesday, and Saturday, son!" Nightshady screeches, and kicks me again, further demonstrating her flexibility.

This is *not* going how I'd planned.

Kayleb

By the time Brie and I make it to the kitchen, Noah and Nightshade are at each other's throats, knocking plates and cutlery off the counter, slamming into the fridge, the table and chairs—going at it like this is a fight scene from *Drunken Master*.

"Shouldn't we do something?" Brie asks.

A piece of Tupperware goes flying past my head. "Besides observe from a cautious distance?"

"They're going to tear each other apart, Kayleb."

I sigh, looking for an in, and just as I'm about to join the fray, two things become abruptly evident: one, Nightshade's got some serious moves in her. Two, she's got Noah pinned on the floor, but is no longer trying to beat the living daylights out of him. Rather, she's switched to making out with him like there's no tomorrow. And it's not just Nightshade who's gone all hot and heavy; Noah's totally responding in kind. And then some.

Brie tilts her head sideways. "Are...are they...?"

Yep, Nightshade's got Noah's dong out.

And that's our cue to recede back into the darkness from whence we came.

Christ on a cracker, did this *chica* need to let the genie out of her bottle.

Basking in the aftermath of some major nookie, the madam and I are lying together on her sofa. She may be an older woman, but you'd never know it from her lovin'. The two of us are out of breath; our hair is disheveled, our arms and legs splayed every which way; I've got globs of cucumber pack smeared all over my face and crotch. Needless to say, the living room is a complete mishmash of jostled furniture and discarded clothing.

"I'm not going to lie to you," Nightshade murmurs. "It's been a long time since I've been plowed like that."

"Ditto," I reply, licking some residual cucumber from my lips.

"And they say youth is wasted on the young."

"Who says that?"

"Complete and utter idiots." Nightshade snuggles against me. "You know, I was wrong about you. You are a *lovely* young man."

"Truce?"

"Truce." She lets out the most satisfied sigh you ever heard, starts handling my junk affectionately. "My, they're certainly making them bigger and better these days, aren't they?"

"The Padalecki Curse."

"Shall we go another round?"

"A favor first?"

"Anything, my deliciousness."

"Lift the curse? The bad luck streak one, I mean."

Nightshade chuckles. "Oh, darling. I never cursed you."

"You didn't?"

"It was all hooey. There's no such thing as curses. Astrology, crystal balls—it's all smoke and mirrors, honey buns." She lets go of me, gives me an amused look. "You don't actually think I *cursed* you and your brother, do you?"

"Oh, no, of course not. Figure of speech." Hem, haw, and so forth.

"You *did!*" Nightshade cackles. "Oh, *lordee*, that's the cutest thing I've heard all week!" She kisses me on the nose, sits up. "Why don't you go tell your brother and his little lady friend that you'll be staying here tonight. I'll pour us a couple of drinks and we can work on your *other* curse in the master bedroom." Another kiss, and she exits the living room.

Now, *that* is a classy woman.

I get to my feet, flex my jaw, do a few arm and leg stretches for good measure while looking for my undies amidst the carnage. Not finding them, I make do with a pair of throw-pillows, one for my front, the other for my rear. I scoop up my keys from inside a coffee mug and skedaddle outside.

Kay-Kay and Brie Cheese are pouting on the front step like a couple of lost puppies.

"What was *that* all about?" Kay-Kay asks, gesturing at Nightshade's house and

looking both concerned as well as incredulous.

"*That*," I reply, "was a spontaneous circus of delight. I think I'm in love, Kay-Kay."

Brie Cheese gets to her feet.

Kay-Kay, too. "What about our *thing*? The reason we came here?"

"Well, there's good news and good news."

Brie Cheese glares at me suspiciously. "What's the 'good' news?"

"I think she's The One."

"I'm *so* happy for you."

"Ultimate sarcasm noted."

"And the other 'good' news?" Kay-Kay asks.

"The whole curse thing is bogus," I say. "Always was."

"Is that what she told you?"

"She did."

"But what about this last year? The house fire? The porn thing? Chronic unemployability? Our lives basically going down the toilet?"

"I blame the cryptocurrency craze. But look..." I hand my car keys to Kay-Kay. "...you two find yourselves a nice little sleazy motel and pick me up in the morning."

"I don't know how to drive," Kay-Kay reminds me.

Oh. Right. Totally forgot about that.

I present the keys to Brie Cheese instead. "Breezy?"

She holds up her hands. "Public transit girl."

"Oh, my *Gawd*, you two are *so* made for each other." Keys withdrawn. "All right. I'll ditch you guys at the side of the road somewhere. Give me a sec to find my clothes."

I duck back inside, poking around for my pants, trying to recall precisely when and where they'd parted from my nether regions. "Nightie?" I call out. "Hon? Have you seen my wallet?" When she doesn't reply, I continue searching, eventually compiling my things (sans one shoe) from various nooks and crannies around the house. One leg into my jeans, and I hear the unmistakeable sound of falling dingleberries coming from the bathroom at the end of the downstairs hall.

Wow. I literally banged the crap out of her.

I finish dressing, walk unevenly down the hall. Light shines through the crack between the bathroom door and the floorboards. More wretched percolations emanate from within, getting progressively louder as I get closer. "Sweets?" I knock on the door. "I'm going to drop Brie Cheese and the Kayster off right quick. Won't be two shakes of a donkey's tail."

One last gigantic fart followed by something wet and lumpy—and accompanied by a muffled cry for help.

Oh, *no*.

I shove the bathroom door open.

Nightie's lying supine and semi-conscious on the floor.

Dookie, in the midst of a bowel movement, is squatting above her face. When it

sees me, it smiles mischievously and says, "You know what they say—do *onto* others as you'd have them do onto you!"

And I just scream and run, down the hall, out the front door, legging it pell-mell for my car, vaguely aware that Kay-Kay and Brie Cheese are asking me what the hell just happened. I ignore them completely, wailing, "*Oh, God! Oh, hell! Oh, crud!*" as I jump behind the wheel and start the engine.

The youngins, realizing they're about to be left behind, hop in as well, again with the questions and concerns, but all I can hear is the voice in my head scolding me for ever having brought us here.

Chapter 19

Kayleb

"I'm screwed—I'm *so* screwed!" Noah moans as we let ourselves into our motel room.

I set down my things and close the door. "Maybe she'll be okay. You said she was just passed out, but not beef-jerkied like Duane, right?"

"I rocked the Bee Gees out of her, Kay-Kay." Noah dumps his enormous clothing bundle onto the floor, drops his bags, starts sifting frantically through the mess. "It was like gobs of milk toppling out of a freshly-opened carton."

"Dude, I didn't need to hear that."

"The cops are going to do an autopsy. They're going to assume I raped her, crapped all over her body, and left her for dead. They're going to cross-reference with cam footage from that creepy chick back at Lovéren, and they're going to conclude that they've got a serial pooper on their hands—*me*." Noah pulls several rolls of masking tape from one of his bags and goes into the bathroom.

Bewildered, I follow him, watching from the doorway as he kneels in front of the toilet and starts taping the lid shut, wrapping the entire bowl as he goes.

Asking the obvious: "What are you doing?"

"I'm not getting caught with my pants down," Noah replies. "Not before I'm legally required to pick up the soap in a filthy prison shower."

"What do we do if we have to take a dump in the middle of the night?"

"We'll lumberjack it." Noah finishes taping the toilet, then does the bathtub, securing the shower nozzle and drain. When he's finished, he hands me the remaining tape and goes back into the other room. "No chances, Kay-Kay. Go do Brie Cheese. Tape up her toilet, too." He throws himself face-down onto one of the beds. Moans dejectedly.

"That's your plan?" I ask, standing at the foot of the bed. "Just lie there and wait for the cops to pick you up?"

Noah mumbles something unintelligible into the bedspread.

That's that.

I'm tempted to face-down it for the rest of the night as well. However, even if I wanted to, I'd never be able to sleep. No way. So, taking Noah's suggestion, I head over to Brie's room to tape her toilet.

She answers the door dressed down in a long T-shirt.

"A little healthy paranoia, courtesy of Noah." I hold up the roll of masking tape.

"You don't think that creature can reach us out here?"

"It found its way to Madam Nightshade's place."

Frowning, Brie lets me in.

I "secure" her bathroom, then join her at the breakfast table, where she's surfing the Web on her phone.

"There's nothing on Twitter or any of the news sites about Duane or Madam Nightshade," she says.

"Oh, there will be." I rest my head on the tabletop. "Along with our mugshots, maybe an interview or two with our next door neighbors, a high school guidance counselor thrown in for good measure..." I sigh. "Noah's right. We are *so* screwed."

Brie looks worried. "Do you really think so?"

"Well, the cops will just question you, probably give you a stern warning about hanging out with hapless losers. Me and Noah, they're going to lock us up until we're old and gay."

"Don't you mean old and gray?"

"That, too."

Brie thinks for a moment. "Maybe if we just explain—"

"What's to explain? As far as anyone but us is going to be concerned, we Gangnam-Styled our landlord, then cruised on over to the local psychic, where you and I kept watch out front while Noah forced his way into her house and pumped her full of his DNA. Before he suffocated her with his own personal chili."

"But that's not what happened."

I lift my head and look at Brie. "Prove it."

After a beat: "I don't know about you, but I'm definitely *not* okay with the whole jail-time thing. That golem's still out there, and as you mentioned, it seems to have found its way out of Duane's pipes. It's bad enough rotting in a prison cell without having to worry that a poop monster's going to climb out of your toilet when you least expect it."

She's right, of course. "But what can we do? Ty's down for the count. And even if he wasn't, you heard him back at Lovéren. He wants nothing to do with us."

"We could hit up Scatman again, ask him for—"

"Forget Scatman. We followed his advice and it got us nowhere. Honestly, I don't think he knows crap about crap."

"Your optimism is truly inspiring."

Straightening, I reach out and take Brie's hand. "I'm sorry. I'm not helping, am I?"

"No, you're not."

"Let me get a couple hours' sleep. We'll go see Scatman again first thing in the morning." I stand, push my chair in. "If we're not under arrest by then."

Brie stands, too, and walks me to the door. She opens it. "You know, I never did thank you for fixing my laptop."

"No worries," I tell her, and smile half-heartedly. "Even though I never got to

finish."

"Still..."

"It was just a favor—"

Brie leans in and pecks me on the cheek.

Lingers.

Waiting.

Subtly inviting me to kiss her back.

I think?

Fox Mulder once said that he wanted to believe, and so do I—but the world has enough Noahs. I don't need to go jumping the gun just because I'm wishing upon a thousand stars that a kiss is an automatic invitation for something more, and that *not* taking advantage of such invitations would be a grotesque waste of an opportunity to—oh, whatever. By this time tomorrow I may very well be staring at the inside of a jail cell. Overcoming my shyness, I duck in for a second kiss, this one on the lips, accompanied by a quick prayer to God: please let her be into me.

Brie's response is...tongue. Nothing major, nothing scandalous. Just enough to let me know I'm not entirely out of line. It's both weird and wonderful. Bridget had always had this entitlement thing going on whenever it came to making out or sex. Like, I had to earn each and every kiss or fondle, and if I worked hard enough, I'd get a little something in return. But here's this cute Asian geek-girl who's not only letting me kiss her for free, she's actually responding in kind—and all I had to do was partially fix her laptop, kill her landlord, and summon a fecal golem. To quote from the immortal *David After Dentist*: "Is this real life?"

After a moment, we break it off and take turns looking embarrassed.

"Uh...sorry," I murmur. "I don't know why I just did that."

"Likewise," Brie replies.

For a brief instant I imagine the two of us tumbling together onto the bed and...oh, God, what if she wants to make out? What if she wants to go all the way? It's been forever (that translates to about a year for those of us in our early twenties) since I was with a girl *that way*. It had taken going steady for almost as long before I'd deciphered Bridget's various signals enough to be assured that she wouldn't kill me for sleeping with her. I've known Brie for all of a single weekend. If I were Noah, that would be enough for the two of us to immediately shuck off our clothes and have at it. Go out with a bang, so to speak. That's not my style. I need...confirmation.

I study Brie.

She studies me—

"Okaygoodnight," I blurt, and quickly leave.

Like a boss.

Chapter 20

Kayleb

Amazingly enough, I manage to get a few hours' sleep before being jolted awake by one of Noah's farts. Normally, his various assorted nocturnal gasses don't get me more than a little upset that I have to open a window or turn on the air-conditioner in order to keep from suffocating, but with all that's been going on lately, you'll forgive me if I'm suspicious of even the slightest queef.

I glance over at him. At some point during the night he must have had a sleep-stripping episode, because he's now fully nude, lying face-down, ass-up. A trail of clothes leads from the breakfast table to his bed. Momentarily, he stops snoring, farts loudly again. I lie back down, holding my nose. As bad as it stinks, at least I'm assured that it wasn't supernatural in nature.

He farts once more.

Resumes snoring.

For God's sake.

I scowl and get out of bed, stumble over his clothing pile and to the window. I push it all the way open. Then I make my way into the bathroom, muttering under my breath as I go, "That is *not* normal." I close the door and flick on the light, start working my pants open when I realize the toilet is still taped up. Instinctively, I move to un-tape it, but then I pause, reconsidering. Noah's methodology had seemed almost childish before, but now that I think about it, I'm not so sure I want to dangle my dong over what may or may not be a glorified poop-monster portal. Yet, I really, *really* have to take a leak.

After shifting from foot to foot for several minutes, I side with my bladder. Hastily unwrapping the toilet, I lift the lid and let loose. With my arm propped against the wall, I close my eyes, and, for an instant, all is right with the world. That is, until I hear the sound of my urine splashing against sudden unexpected chowder.

"Hey!" comes a familiar emphysemic voice from down below. "Watch where you point that thing!"

My eyes snap open, and I jerk backward, slamming into the bathroom wall.

The dook golem stands up in the toilet bowl, spreads its arms. "Surprised to see me?"

I swallow hard.

"I'll take that as a yes." The golem brushes itself off vainly. "You know, that stunt you pulled back there by the swimming pool made quite a mess. But don't worry. You know the old saying. Sometimes it takes more than one flush to get rid of a good turd."

Please tell me I'm dreaming—

"Does it *smell* like you're dreaming?"

"I...I guess not." Wait. How did the golem know what I was thinking? "What are you doing here?"

The golem shrugs, climbs out of the bowl, and sits on the rim, swinging its stubby legs back and forth. "Wherever you go, I go."

"What?"

"You mean, you haven't figured it out yet?"

I glance at the Hebrew printed across the golem's forehead, and immediately my eyes dart to the vanity, searching for something I can use to erase the aleph that's not my finger—

The bathroom door flies open; Noah, half asleep, barges in, rubbing his eyes, adjusting the pair of boxers he's put on backward. "Dude, tell me you're *not* talking to your schlong at three in the morning..." He trails off, freezes on the spot when he sees the golem. "Crap."

The golem waves cheerfully. "Oh, goodie. Big brother's here. Two birds, one stone, and all that."

Noah looks at me, at the golem. "Uh...what, now?"

"I was just about to explain the reason your overgrown muscleman pal couldn't control me. Firstly, that kind of thing only works on lesser craps, craps taken by vegans or very small babies. Secondly, Ty isn't my master. Never was."

"He isn't?"

"Duh."

"Then...who is?" I ask.

The golem nods at me. "You are, of course."

Noah pays me an accusing stare. "What's he talking about, Kay-Kay?"

"There's a reason Scatman's dateless and making out with a Hot Pocket as we speak," the golem continues. "He's not that good at what he does. He didn't see the obvious. He didn't get it."

"Didn't get *what*?" I urge.

"It's simple. All the people who ever gave you crap, I give *them* crap. On your behalf. Not Ty. *You*. Ty's leavings provided the brawn, but it's *your* angst that's the brains behind the operation."

"That's...that's crazy."

The golem shrugs. "It's what you want."

"I don't—I wouldn't—I'd never want to hurt anyone."

"Oh, but you do. As hard as you may try to convince yourself otherwise, you're really just a spineless, dateless loser living with your brother in a lousy apartment run by a giant, throbbing wiener. You've never had a decent job because you're the

'work hard, tell the truth' kind of guy. While everyone else lies, cheats, and bangs their way to a promotion, you're always shown the door. You never compete for anything. You never get the girl because you're afraid you'll scare her off by admitting you like her. Brie has plenty of friends who could've taken her in last night, and her parents live less than an hour away. She came with you not because she had to, but because she *wanted* to. I mean, Jesus, man. That wasn't a goodnight kiss she gave you, and she wasn't wearing any shorts when she gave it. But you'd never know because you're too chicken to find out." The golem shakes its head. "No, you *want* a lot of things—not the least of which is to get even with everyone who ever did you any wrong. Carcinogenic, smart-alecky groundskeepers. Annoying, over-sexed next door neighbors. Token-hoarding convenience store clerks. Middle-aged, jack-off property managers. Two-bit, charlatan fortune tellers..." Smiling wickedly at Noah now: "...overbearing older brothers."

Whoa, hold on a second— "I don't hate Noah, or any of those, er, other people."

"Oh, come on. Look me in the eye and tell me you don't resent the way Noah's always bossing you around, treating you like you're still ten. 'Do this, Kay-Kay. Do that. Why? Because I said so.' He always gets the girls, lounging around the swimming pool all day while *you're* the one sitting hunched in front of the computer and actually *programming* your clients' Web sites."

I blush, not saying anything.

The golem shrugs again. "But hey. Let's save the best for last. Maybe in the meantime we'll, oh, I don't know...ax the ex?" It raises its arms, waving goodbye with one and flushing with the other.

"Get him!" Noah dives for the toilet.

But the golem has already pushed off the seat, plopped itself into the bowl.

Noah tries to grab a hold, but only manages a handful of mushy shoulder.

The toilet finishes flushing.

The tank re-fills, settles.

"What the hell was that about?" Noah asks, scowling, and wrings his hands over the bowl.

"I don't know—"

"*You're* that thing's master? I mean, *really*, Kay?"

"You're going to believe a crap-talking, er, turd?"

"It would explain a lot." Noah takes up post at the sink, turns on the tap full-force. "And why did you just stand there for, like, five minutes while Dookie chatted away? You totally could've wiped that stupid Alf off his face!"

"*Aleph*," I correct, "and I didn't see *you* making any sudden moves."

"Forgive my deer-in-headlights reaction, but I was half asleep, and I was kind of hammered by the news my little bro wants to sic a poop monster on me."

I start out of the bathroom. "Just throw some pants on."

"What for?"

"We need to save Bridget."

Pause. "Again, what for?"

* * *

The drive to Bridget's is initially quiet, with Noah at the wheel, me in the passenger seat.

After some fidgeting, I clear my throat and say, "I, uh...I guess I should apologize."

"For what?" Noah asks.

"Everything." I look out the window. "I mean, I'm the one who picked out Madam Nightshade last year, it was my hurl that activated the golem, and it's my, er, subconscious that's inspiring it to run around killing everybody."

"Dude, that toilet turd was pulling your leg—"

"It's not just what he said. It's..." I swallow, forcing the words out. "Whether or not anything he told us was true, this past year I've blamed you for everything. It was your fault I lost my job, it was your fault we got kicked out of Mom and Dad's —it was your fault I never finished school, never made something of myself. I mean, you heckled Nightshade, and when things started to go sour, it was like, 'Freakin' Noah. There he goes again, acting like a dumbass and bringing his karma down on everyone else.' I was sure she'd cursed us, and...and I kind of hated you for it."

Noah digests this mentally. "Was it really that bad?"

"Yeah."

"If you felt that way, why didn't you say something?"

"I didn't want...I mean, our lives sucked so much I figured the last thing you needed was a visit from my inner drama queen. So, I stuck it out. It was no big deal."

"Um, considering the fact that the result is a dude-shaped turd acting out your innermost pet peeves toward me and the rest of modern society, I'd say it was a pretty big deal."

"It's not like that."

Noah frowns. "What, then?"

It takes me a moment to respond. "You're my big brother."

"Am I supposed to know what you mean by that?"

"My whole life I've followed you, looked up to you, tried to be just like you. But no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't get the gigs like you did, or charm the girls at the bar. I could never pick up a camera and take spectacular photographs, or just sit around in my underwear sketching absolutely *amazing* Marvel-grade superheroes. Or DC. Or whatever. I was never good enough, no matter how much I wanted to be you. I always ended up walking in your shadow."

For once Noah doesn't have a snide remark or witty comeback, but, rather, looks a little taken aback as he mulls over what I've said.

"I used to get jealous," I continue, "but it was all just stuff at the back of my mind, you know? I never wanted to *act* on any of it, and I certainly didn't want it to come to life as a, er, giant turd." I sigh. "I'm sorry, Noah. I'm sorry I screwed everything up."

Noah rolls his eyes. “Dear God...” Louder: “You didn’t screw anything up. Yeah, the golem may be acting out your subconscious thoughts and desires and all that, but...look. This is just a crazy set of circumstances. Wrong place, wrong time. I wouldn’t have it any other way, though. Well, I *would* have it any other way. But you’re my little brother. Truthfully, as much as we get on each other’s nerves, I don’t see how I could’ve made it through this last year without you by my side. Our family, our friends—hell, the entire world—kind of left us for dead after the *Altar Boy* incident. Even though we had nothing to do with it, it was still somehow our fault. It was the excuse everyone used to point the finger at our being in our early twenties and living at home trying to do the freelance thing instead of holding down ordinary nine-to-fives. We became the misfits looking for trouble, and when trouble found us, the world stopped giving a damn. But you were there. You kept me going, Kay.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

Wow. That was actually kind of meaningful. And he called me Kay. Not Kay-Kay, but *Kay*. “Uh...thanks.”

“No prob.”

“Seriously.”

“Yeah, yeah. Should we touch dongs now?”

“No, I’m good.”

“Come on. Christmas presents early this year, Kay.”

Chapter 21

Kayleb

Bridget's apartment is in an older two-story complex on the east side of town. The place is gated, but Noah and I are young and unassuming enough to make quick work of getting in without attracting any attention or breaking our necks. I know the way by memory; I'd roomed here with Bridget for a few months toward the end. It was supposed to be our new life together, our Utopian solution. Now I can never rent here again because, skyrocketing southern California real estate prices aside, I'll always be reminded that this is where we'd spent the Fleetwood Mac phase of our relationship.

Noah and I (not sure when he lost his shoe) step up to Bridget's front door. I ring the bell, take out my phone. I'd called her on the way over, but it had gone straight to voice mail. I try calling again. Texting, too.

"I'm telling you," Noah says, "she's either Sunday clubbing, or she moved to Cucamonga." He reconsiders. "Or Dookie's serving her Sloppy Joes as we speak."

"Stop calling it that."

"What, the Dookie part, or the Sloppy Joe part?"

"Both." I shake my head, thinking for a moment, brightening when something occurs to me. "Bridget never locks her balcony door. We used to argue about it all the time. Come on."

"Oh, I see," Noah scoffs. "When I do it, it's breaking and entering. When you do it, it's *Rescue 911*."

Working our way to the rear of the building, we approach the unit beneath Bridget's. There's no right way to break into your ex-girlfriend's apartment, so I just try my best not to look like a cat burglar as I quickly climb onto the patio wall, standing, wobbling, steadying, and, finally, grabbing onto the lip of Bridget's balcony above. I lift myself up, thanking Christ I've kept a decent gym bod. (Let that be a lesson, kids: stay in school, don't skip PE—because one day you might need to do pull-ups in order to get inside other people's homes.) I beckon to Noah.

He looks around to make sure no one's watching, then climbs after. Halfway up, he stops, wriggling his legs and twisting his thighs as his jeans inexplicably decide to lower themselves. "You've *got* to be kidding me!" he grumbles.

"What's the matter with you?" I grumble back.

"Like I'm doing this on purpose!"

Noah's now hanging from the balcony with his pants around his ankles. And with one shoe missing. I kind of want to snap a photo of him like this for preemptive blackmail purposes, but the angle's wrong from where I'm standing. I help him up, then check the sliding glass door, which, heck yeah, is unlocked. I open it and step inside, shuffle uncertainly through the darkness.

Noah restores normalcy to his attire, follows shortly thereafter—and swears under his breath as he immediately knocks into something. Something made of glass, judging by the very loud sound of it shattering on the floor.

"Dude, what are you doing?" I whisper.

"How should I know?" Noah says. "I can't see a thing!"

"Just...don't move, don't touch anything." Using my phone's flashlight, I find the nearest lamp and turn it on. That thing Noah knocked over? A rickety-looking stand that had been supporting an ornate glass candleholder.

"*That*," Noah proclaims, pointing his finger at the broken holder, "is the *dumbest* place for a glass candleholder."

"Bridget's going to freak," I say, sighing and shaking my head.

"If she's still alive."

"And if she's dead, she's going to haunt us over it."

"Morbid, bro."

I gaze down the hall leading into the bedroom and, starting forward, wonder if it's supposed to be that dark or if it's just my imagination.

"Wait," Noah says, holding me back. "What's the plan if our little poop friend's in there?"

"You grab him, I'll smear the letter off his face."

"Why do I have to grab him?"

"Because if I'm his master, I have to be the one to erase the letter."

"Oh. Right." Noah still doesn't look happy.

I start into the hall again.

Again Noah stops me. "Wait—what if something happens and I get the opportunity to smear first? Should I wait for you, or should I just go ahead and smear anyway just in case—"

"Can we?"

Noah shuts up.

I flick on the light and step cautiously into the bedroom. Bridget's bed is empty, and still made, insinuating that she's indeed out for the night. While Noah peeks underneath it, I pay the darkened bathroom entry a wary glance, and walk over to the closet instead, open the door—

What.

The.

Hell.

"Dude," I murmur. "Come look at this."

Noah joins me and peers into the closet as well. For a moment we just stand shoulder to shoulder, transfixed, and bear witness to what I can only describe as a

seriously disconcerting shrine of sorts, complete with photographs of Noah and myself, candles, weird symbols painted in blood, a bowl containing tufts of hair, fingernails, a used condom.

"Correct me if I'm wrong," Noah says quietly, "but this looks like a hate shrine."

"Scatman was right," I add. "Practicing witch."

"More like practicing *bitch*."

I run my hands through my hair. "She cursed us—she actually *cursed* us!"

"How did she even *get* all of this? Did she, like, go through our trash?" Noah touches the bowl with the hair and fingernails, frowns at the condom. "Is that yours or mine?"

Just then, the sound of the front door opening and closing echoes down the hall, and I hear Bridget shout, "What the hell?"—no doubt in response to what Noah did to her candleholder.

"Crud—she's home," Noah grunts, and shoves me back a step. "Be cool. Act natural." He shuts the closet door. Then, after cycling through several confrontational poses, he moves over to the bed, rests his foot on the frame, props his elbow on his leg, and looks about as natural as a Mr. Spock cosplayer at a *Star Wars* convention.

Bridget stomps into the room. She's got a cast-iron skillet gripped in her hands. When she sees me and Noah, she stops in her tracks, surprised, and lowers the skillet. Slightly. "*You two?*"

I wave feebly.

Noah continues to look ridiculous in his "I've been waiting for you" pose.

Bridget narrows her eyes. "Do you want to tell me what the hell you're doing in my apartment—and why my candleholder is broken?"

"Do *you* want to tell *us* why you have a demonic shrine to our demise hidden in your closet?" Noah fires back.

I roll my eyes at him. "Okay, I have to ask—what was the point of closing the closet door if you're going to *immediately* reveal that you were just in there?"

Bridget's gaze darts quickly to the closet. She bites her lip, feigning innocence. "What are you talking about?"

"We know about the shrine," I explain.

"What shrine?"

"The shrine-effigy-voodoo-or-whatever thing you've got in your closet."

Bridget frowns. "That's my personal business—"

"Um, excuse me?" Noah interrupts. "*Your* personal business?" He walks over to the closet, yanks the door open, and grabs the bowl of clippings. He holds it up for Bridget to see. "I..." He trails off. "It won't kill me if I hurl this onto the floor in a fit of blind rage, will it?"

Bridget shoots him the mother of all scowls. "No."

"Good. Then I suppose these are *your* clippings?" He throws the bowl, reaches for the photographs, holds them above his head.

"Noah, *stop*—"

"I suppose these are *your* photos?"

"It's not what you think!"

Noah pauses. "Oh, so it's *not* a demonic shrine to our demise?"

"Okay, it's what you think. But that doesn't change the fact that you guys broke into my apartment and are messing with my stuff—"

I wave my hands in the air, cutting Bridget off and forestalling Noah's next quip. "How could you do this to us? To *me*?"

Bridget's expression is a mix of anger and awkwardness. "Do you really want to know?"

"You ruined my life! You ruined my brother's life! I mean, a curse? Really? Who *does* that?"

"Like you didn't have your part in this! Like you were the only one suffering while we were dating! I had dreams for us! I had plans! But you never saw the big picture, you never even *tried* to understand!"

(Noah lowers the photos, entranced by our arguing.)

"What are you talking about?" I exclaim. "I was the most understanding boyfriend on the planet! I was *totally* Team Bridget! But whenever I wanted do something, it was never good enough! 'Don't buy that shirt, Kayleb, it gives you duck neck. Kayleb, I want you to stop hanging out with Josh—he never comments on my Instagram posts. Kayleb, I deleted all your Rush MP3s because I'm tired of how uncool you look headbanging to "Tom Sawyer" whenever we go jogging.'"

"You looked *so* uncool—"

"I could never just do something, or go somewhere—I had to run everything by you first!"

Bridget jabs her finger at the closet. "You want to know what that is? It's an eye for an eye, Kayleb!"

"No, cursing us is *not* an eye for an eye, Bridget! It's, like, an eye for a leg! It's an eye for a, um, kidney!"

"Nice analogy, bro," Noah whispers.

"Ugh! There you go again!"

"There I go *what*?" I yell back.

"I'm calling the cops!" Before we can stop her, Bridget ducks into the bathroom, slamming and locking the door.

Noah drops the photos and gives me a dire look. "Not the bathroom—anywhere but the bathroom."

I try the knob, knock on the door. "Bridget?"

"*Beat it!*" comes her muffled response.

"All right, look. We're both upset. But let's talk this out—"

"*I said eat dong!*"

"Just listen to me for a sec. The whole crazy-ass evil shrine thing is pretty messed up, but we can deal with that later. Right now you just need to open the door, because...um, because..." I trail off, looking to Noah for guidance. In a lower tone of voice: "How do crisis negotiators deal with ex-girlfriends locked in bathrooms?"

"They get someone else to handle it for them." Noah steps up to the door and starts banging heavily. "Bridget, there's a stinky turd monster about to burst out of your toilet. You need to calmly and quietly leave the bathroom in an orderly fashion—"

"Dude!" I yell, shoving him out of the way. "Not helpful!"

Bridget

Okay, just to be fair, I am *not* a practicing witch. Kayleb's acting like I own a black cat or keep a book of spells tucked underneath my bed. The action in my closet, well, I'm willing to admit it may be an...unorthodox way of settling with one's ex, but it's not *totally* unwarranted. This is the friggin' Padalecki brothers we're talking about. Kayleb is weak sauce. Noah is the equivalent of a Lamborghini that's learned to drive itself, but doesn't know how to use its own brakes. Between the two of them, there's always too much personality, or too little. It's all fancy packaging for lousy specs. Screw that—screw *you*, Kayleb. It takes more than a pretty face and reasonably good fashion sense to make a relationship work.

"I'm calling the police!" I shout, sitting on the toilet and taking out my phone. I dial 911. "Hello? My ex-boyfriend broke into my apartment, and is—" I kind of pause there because the toilet kind of just burped loudly, this vile sludge suddenly seeping between the seat and the bowl. "*Ew! Ew! Ew!*" I hop off of the seat, slipping on the overflow, but managing to keep my footing—though I drop my phone. It splashes in the pooling excrement as I climb into the bathtub. I grip the rim with both hands, watching as the bathroom floor is marinated in muck and wondering what in the hell could cause the plumbing to back up like this. It sounds like Kayleb is jiggling the doorknob, intent on getting in, but honestly, 911 is less of a priority now than is a twenty-four-hour plumbing service.

My phone's halfway between the tub and the toilet. I reach for it, extending myself as far as I can without having to touch the floor for support. I've almost got it when motion from the toilet catches my attention—specifically the seat lifting, and a small man made of poo poking his head out from inside the bowl.

He smiles deviously. "Hello, my little soft-serve."

I scream, shrinking back into the tub.

(Kayleb has started throwing himself against the door.)

The poop-man hops out of the toilet, toddles toward me. "Don't look so surprised. An eye for an eye, remember? Tit for shat!" He reaches the tub, makes as if to climb inside.

Screaming again, I grab the nearby plunger and start jabbing wildly at the little man. One of my blows takes off his left arm, which goes flying across the bathroom

—

—and hits Kayleb, having just succeeded in forcing the door open, right in the face.

Dookie howls in pain and wags his stump at Bridget. "Watch it, wench! You almost circumcised me!" He glances down at his crotch (which is just as genderless now as it's always been), then back up at Bridget. "Oh, wait. That's right." He laughs and starts at her again, this time egging her on as he dodges back and forth.

"Grab him," Kay-Kay says to me as he wipes his face hastily. "I'll erase the letter."

"What if I just corner him, and you—"

"Dude, we already discussed this!"

"Fine."

The two of us charge the Dookster. He's jumped into the tub and attached himself to Bridget's face, which he's now humping with gusto.

"This is for all the times you faked it when you and Kayleb were in the sack!" he bellows.

Bridget flails her arms and legs.

"You're into witchcraft!" I yell, stepping partially into the tub and making several half-hearted attempts at grabbing Dookie. "Cast a spell on the little bastard!"

Unable to respond verbally, Bridget gives me the middle finger.

Good. That means she's all right—for the moment.

Time to go for broke. I grab Dookie around the abdomen, really dig my fingers in as I peel him off of Bridget, leaving thick, gooey ropes of dook hanging from her face. He wriggles and writhes in my hands as I present him to Kay-Kay. "Do your thing!"

He looks hesitant.

Don't chicken out, Kay-Kay—don't you freakin' chicken out! I did *not* drop my pants in public, destroy a candleholder, and smother myself in poo just for you to—

He reaches up and dabs at Dookie's forehead. The result is dubious: rather than cleanly erasing the aleph character, he inadvertently smears several of the letters together. Still, it's enough to get a reaction from Dookie, who goes rigid and convulses out of my grasp. I back out of the way (Kay-Kay, too) as he stumbles around flatulently, exaggerating the death throes, gasping, choking, wheezing.

Right before the end, he kneels in front of the little bro, tugs on his pant leg with his remaining arm, and rasps, "I only wanted...the best for you. Promise... promise you'll...live for me..."

I know I've said this before, but... "Blue Öyster Cult. *Heaven Forbid*. Great song."

Dookie stumbles to the toilet, collapses over the bowl, his arm and legs hanging limp, his upturned rump, whether intentionally or otherwise, mooning us. For a moment, everyone stays very still, holding their breath, waiting for confirmation that we've indeed deactivated him.

Bridget lets go of the plunger; it splashes against the floor. She peels a hefty

chunk of poo from her face, tears welling in her eyes. "What...the hell...was *that*?"

"*That* was your curse," Kay-Kay says.

I grab a wad of toilet paper and start wiping my face, my clothes. "No need to thank us, Bridge, though some money or Oreos would be nice." Realizing that there's far more to clean than I'm equipped to handle, I give up shortly thereafter and toss my wad into the toilet.

Ever the survivor, Bridget manages to bitch through her tears: "You two have really done it this time. I mean, you break into my apartment, rummage through my stuff, trash my bathroom, there are poop creatures jumping out of toilets and running around and...and..." She just sort of trails off at this point, caught somewhere between chewing us out and mumbling incoherently to herself.

Kay-Kay calmly washes his hands in the sink, dries them on the sides of his pants. He reaches into his pocket, takes out his cell phone. He holds it up and, showing Bridget the screen, navigates to where her contact listing is stored. "See that?" He deletes her entry, tucks his phone back into his pocket, and leaves the bathroom.

For the win, little bro.

"Are you for real?" Bridget stands in the tub. "What about my apartment? Who's going to clean this mess up? Kayleb! Don't you dare walk out on me!"

Leaving the bathroom as well, I flick her off on Kay-Kay's behalf.

Chapter 22

Kayleb

Noah pulls the car into the motel lot and parks, shuts off the engine, sits gripping the steering wheel, the morning sunlight highlighting his turd-caked face, hair, and clothes. He works his tongue inside his mouth, reaches up and pulls a small pellet from his teeth. He flicks the pellet away and sighs.

"What now?" I ask, letting out a breath of air I realize I've been holding for at least the last year.

"I don't know about you, but I'm sleeping like a rock until checkout time." He moves to open the door and get out of the car, but stops, smelling his armpit. "Maybe I'll shower first."

I don't think anyone has ever had a better idea.

We head back to our room, where briefly we argue over who gets to wash up first. Deadlocked, Noah then suggests that we simply shower together, citing something about, "twice the clean in half the time," at which point I step past him and into the bathroom, closing and locking myself inside.

"Fine, you go first!" he calls through the door. "But only because I'm feeling generous!"

Twenty minutes of lathering, rinsing, and repeating later, I emerge to find that he's fallen asleep curled on the floor. I'm exhausted enough to do the same, but instinct instead delivers me to Brie's door.

Groggily, she answers, and even with her mussed hair and rumpled T-shirt, she's the most adorable thing I've ever seen.

"Good morning," I say, waving, smiling.

"Good..." Brie yawns. "...morning. What time is it?"

"Six, give or take."

She runs her hands through her hair. "What are you doing up so early?"

I fidget, shift back and forth on my feet, old habits dying hard, new ones threatening to take their place. But I'm not defeated yet. Though it probably looks more like stranger danger to anyone passing by, in my mind the next thirty seconds are the exhibiting of a bold, cinematic moment, embracing Brie, kissing her grandly, no holds barred, morning breath be damned—doing what I should've done last night. Am I at all confident that she'll kiss me back, or that she'll ever talk

to me again after pouncing on her like this? Not in the least. But if it's my last morning as a free man, I won't go gentle into that good night. Not without a final throwing of my mack.

When at last I break it off, Brie looks at me, surprised, perplexed. "Okay, that was...weird."

"I wanted to, uh, thank you in advance."

"Thank me for what?"

"For having breakfast with me. Feel up to some coffee and..." I reach into my pocket, pull out some spare change, a few bills—I want to make sure I'm not promising Denny's when I can only afford McDonald's. "...Egg McMuffins?"

Brie thinks for a good, long moment, then smiles, cautiously charmed. "Let me get dressed."

Bridget

The vector control guy looks like he's lost the will to live. "Jesus Christ almighty, ma'am, what happened in here?"

I poke my head into the bathroom. "Never mind the mess. Just get rid of..." I trail off. The little poop creature's body is gone. All that's left are some skid marks leading into the toilet bowl.

Kayleb

I'm leaning against the wall, my hands in my pockets as I wait for Brie, when my phone goes off. I answer it to Dom's usual unintelligible yammering, and hold the earpiece away from my head, halfway listening for a handful of seconds before pressing the phone to my ear again. "Dom? Dom. *Dom.* This is important, so listen very carefully. No offense, but I don't give a damn about the Web site. You know why? Because for the first time in my life, it's a Monday morning, and instead of wasting away at my computer slinging code, I'm having breakfast with a beautiful girl. So, you know what? To hell with your site, to hell with your business, and to hell with *you*. I quit." I end the call just as Brie steps outside.

"Who was that?" she asks.

I slide my phone back into my pocket. "Just checking my voice mail."

Epilogue

Goddamned freelancers.

Dom *knew* this would happen. He had a premonition he'd be standing here at the head of the conference room, his cell phone held at arm's length, his face a literal emoticon of disbelief as, seated before him, his client reps watch and wait for a Web site that's never going to be done, and what do you know? Here he is on a Monday morning making it all come true.

"Just a little aggressive motivational technique," he explains, ending the call, putting his phone away, and clearing his throat awkwardly. "Everything's, ah, under control. My tech guys are uploading the code as we speak, and, er, the site should be live shortly." *Dear God in heaven, if you answer just one of my prayers today, let it be this one: please guide Kayleb that he might will this wretched site into existence in the next five minutes.* "Could anyone else use some coffee?" Without waiting for an answer, Dom makes himself scarce, hurrying down the hall and into the men's room. He's not at the messing-his-pants stage yet; he just needs to breathe deeply, swallow a few times, and stall for as long as it takes to come up with the small collection of excuses he's going to feed the client when it becomes apparent the end of the world is nigh.

He goes over to the sink, rests his knuckles against the marbled top. In the mirror, he sees the reflection of an Asian businessman, forty-ish, meticulously-groomed comb-over, designer glasses, expensive shirt...and no Web site. He activates the tap with an angry wave of his hand, splashing his face with water. *American kids. Not good for anything but mowing lawns or serving fast food through a window. No sense of responsibility or loyalty whatsoever! Well, Kayleb and Noah will get no referral from me! I'll make sure they never work in this town again—*

The sound of water dripping onto the floor catches his attention.

He pauses, listening, turning in place. Through the open stall door, he spots the toilet overflowing.

That's two catastrophes before lunchtime. Could my day get any worse?

He walks quickly into the stall and tries to activate the sensor. When nothing happens, he peers into the toilet bowl and, caught totally off guard by what's moving around inside, what shouldn't be possible, what's clawing its way toward him with a sneer on its face and a mischievous twinkle in its eye, a single thought crosses his mind:

Oh, crap.

About the Author

Jesse Gordon is the occasional author of numerous books, short stories, and screenplays. He is also creator and supreme overlord of the *SuperMegaNet* pseudoverse. Current projects include finishing his latest novel and finding the perfect matcha latte, though not necessarily in that order.